

EXPEDITION

-1-

Bill tensed up and drew himself up in the front seat of the Duster as Randy headed southwest on Virginia Route 83, and climbed to a plateau. The mountain looked like a ham butt that had been whacked to pieces at a garden party – especially one given by his first piano teacher. The ridge, denuded and destroyed, and carved into bald terraces and ugly steps.

“So this is your strip mining!” Randy declared. “God!” He, like Bill, was revolted. Randy had lived placidly, but the sight of man’s abuse to nature on such a scale released his excitement and indignation.

“This is pure hell,” Randy screamed, steering carefully to a shoulder, where he parked. “I won’t believe this unless I take a picture.” He reached for his camera. It was one of the most deliberate efforts he had ever made, and a great deal more purposeful than his homework for his graduate courses. “Bill, I know what you brought me here for. This is a crime, an atrocity against humanity, and it has to be witnessed by real persons.”

Bill nodded mutely. He was fighting back a queasy rumbling in his gut that made him gulp for relief from the impending nausea.

Bill gasped. “Whole cubic miles of this mountain were discarded like rubbish. It’s not what man did to nature, this is man destroying man! The future of the race has been imperiled!”

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As a child, Bill was a loner. When slightly shy of the age of reason, he forsook the company of neighborhood chums who teased him, and indulged an imaginary playmate, Back. By the time he was a teenager, he discovered Romantic music, and forsook Back for the muse. His existence became orchestrated.

Bill identified with selected composers, and certain symphonies and concertos drew out his emotions, building them to chills-to-fever climaxes. Mahler’s “Resurrection” Symphony brought him indescribable ecstasy, while Bach, Haydn and Schubert made adolescence livable. Bartok’s “Concerto for Orchestra” set his heart dancing.

His father grumbled, “You’re married to your classical records. It’s making you a social retard. You’re penalizing your relationships with people.” Even, “You don’t see people as people, but as foils.”

With college companions, he took up hiking. That was when his worship of mountains was initiated. The Appalachians became as sacred to him as Olympus to Greeks; they were his temples. His excursions through their vast, noble greenery imparted an importance to his self-image, a *raison d’être*, like the ego that venerated his father’s personality from the distinction of having been everywhere there was on the East Coast.

Of course, the most important mountains were situated in the West. However, the Appalachians were his own; and, likewise, he belonged to them. He would visit them with resources within his reach, and not look to picture books for secondhand satisfaction. The mountains offered

more than vicarious gratification. They were the surrogates that took the place of television stars and ordinary people

“It’s the Allegheny Front country in West Virginia that has it all,” he often remarked out loud to himself.”

While most Washington area residents were content to satisfy themselves with trips along Virginia’s Skyline Drive, Bill sought the scenic wonders of West Virginia. A varied landscape there would have been a treasure trove for Turner, Innes or Constable, and a Garden of Allah for Maxfield Parrish. Its impressive, varied escarpment rose up in the verdant, deciduous, ordinary terrain of the East to a special, fragile plateau crossing the border of West Virginia and Virginia. The locale is so rugged in places that state lines have never been accurately established.

Bill’s drives west from the Shenandoah Valley brought him into confrontation with high ridges green with tall, stately strands of spruce, each of them precursors of an alien world just out of sight. Next, he encountered the windswept, balding, domed summits which supported only banks of crushed, parallel pine shrubs, their gray-green needles blasted into thin horizontal arrows. Through a series of soft, mushy peat bogs, he hiked down hidden gorges with steep sides, formed by sandstone spires.

The climate, during most seasons, was something to be enjoyed only from inside the car. It was raw, and often blustery, and surprisingly dangerous to the dilettante. From November until April, a light coat of corn snow left a marbled surface that was lifeless, encouraging Bill to indulge in his individual separateness.

Bill realized those lofty horizons were vulnerable, fragile and expendable. People lived there, and people constituted a threat. The land was needed for income, for economic exploitation; these requirements were for basics rather than aesthetics, the prerequisites of private or public ownership, or future interests.

Residents of this hilly country grew their own food and bred their own animals. They mined coal, both by excavation, and by shaving down the ridges with their draglines. They slaved with their hands and backs, and often killed themselves doing it.

A few made fortunes at it, and clung to the privilege of staying aloof from the problems that afflicted others, but most who worked the land did it to protect their families. They struggled to perpetuate the species, and lived without pretensions.

Bill was not a dedicated reformer. That is, he was not devoted to improving society, so much as he responded to rumors the mountains were being torn down. Passing idly through almost unknown shantytowns with such quaint names as Bloomery, Lehew, Clover Lick, Watoga, Neola, and Stony Bottom, he gawked at the population as would any motoring tourist. He did not care if he aroused local resentment through his voyeurism.

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In Bill’s mind, a friend was someone who mattered. He had one good friend, and several acquaintances whose company he enjoyed. These were persons whose success he rejoiced to see, whose concerns he shared, who had interests in common with his own, whose opinions of him he valued, and toward whom he wished to show good will.

However, on one level, acquaintances were merely individuals who were there. Bill had not recognized yet that he was using them as foils, how he conversed with them compulsively out of his own need for attention. This was common in the Western world. People could be friendly, and even honest when it came to business transactions or dealing with money, but to anyone who was not part of one's family, it did not matter, when it came down to priorities, whether or how much they might applaud one's talents. Since he left high school, and even after college, good friends vanished through a process of attrition: they had wives and children, and other commitments; they moved away; they had accidents and died. Bill was left alone, as it were, to develop his projects and indulge his wanderlust, and it suited him eminently.

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On what he whimsically called The Last Day of Mark, Bill sped back to his spring-green window of mountains.

He left word of his intentions and destination. "Friday, I'm leaving Washington at noon. I'll meet an old roommate in Eastern Kentucky on Saturday morning, and we'll drive around the countryside to inspect the strip-mining all over again, and find out whether it's getting any worse."

A year ago, after Bill recognized the importance of Mark, Bill had been caught tramping on coal company property. They had a nasty word for it, trespassing. He received a scary, smoky tour, trapped in the cab of a pickup truck with a chain smoker who bragged he could field-strip his cigarettes, of the "reclaimed" lakes and grazing lands, when he yearned for the reassurance of viewing the mountains.

Phil had teased him, "Why, won't you even stay for this going-away party on this Last Day of Mark?"

Fat Phil had become the closest among Bill's group of associates. Bill frankly enjoyed Phil, who provided comic relief. Phil talked about people while carpooling with Bill through Washington's Mixing Bowl. Phil generalized them into categories. For instance, he typed young girls as a genre that landlords were reluctant to rent to, because they did stupid things like pouring lavender paint own the washbowl, and were experts at stopping up the plumbing. Phil reinforced many of Bill's special observations, such as how a lot of guys would gradually go bald on the legs rather the pate.

Phil was an all-family man, unconditionally devoted to his wife and infant on, and proud of being so. He eagerly anticipate moving South. A dollar went further there in those days; he could afford a house and raise his family and lineage better. He sympathize with Bill's warm feelings toward Mark. He called it "real friendship."

Bill came to the point with him. "Well, don't you feel something is wrong with my hanging around so long at the very end? You walked in to work with us this morning. Didn't you notice anything unusual about Mark' attitude?"

"Mmm, well, Bill, I believe Mark was – detached. I did tell him what you did was strictly for friendship."

"You had a good talk with him afterward?"

"I explained to him that you told everyone he was quitting this job because he was getting another one. Is there anything out of the way about that? A friend is always glad to see his pal move up. Sincere interest in the welfare of someone you care for is generous and kind."

"I'm glad you told him that. I certainly want him to understand my motives. Anyway, Phil, remember this: wherever I'm driven, I'll stop beside the road, and say my prayers, and watch a mushroom of smoke go up in the East. Right? Then I can start over."

The truth of the matter was, Bill didn't want to be more attached to Fat Phil. He refused to venerate any entity who was even slightly overweight.

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By late morning, Bill sat next to one of Mark's obese bar buddies in a plush suburban lounge. Mark was at the next round table, as if there could develop a speed dating party. When he noticed Bill, he rolled up his sleeves, exposing muscled, slightly freckled, hairy forearms. Mark's body was in good form, despite a year of "responsibility" for his "instant family" and pampering third ("nth") wife. Family life, however, had started to deprive him of the time he needed to keep working out with free weights and barbells.

Even so, Bill's cold, calculating "scientific" Spock-mind let him feel turned on, dynamically alive; a pupilometric test (and maybe penile plethysmography) would instantly divulge and label his sentiments.

Mark guzzled beer after beer, each with a loud, sensual, "Aa-aaah!" In this manner, he broadcast his usual outgoing personality. After all, he had continually tried to channel Bill into utilizing his "Dale Carnegie" style of self-salesmanship. He would use it on Bill and claim he was teaching Bill a new trick.

Mark was convinced that he was famous for his "outlook", his "perspective," and "viewpoint," while Bill could say that he was attracted by these instead of Mark's undeniable desirable physical attributes, his handsome features, attractive body, and manly figure and swagger.

The outlook conveyed the impression that a person could be more than he really was – a Renaissance man – that he could have a self-concept based on freedom. This would include the personal mobility to launch without ado to explore vistas unencountered by civilized man, or the mental ability to conjure up systematic, logical relationships, replete with holograms, or worlds of the imagination.

Puzzles of logic and mathematical inference were Mark's favorite methods of showing his personal vanity. He taught this to his pupils, claiming this was how he helped people, even Bill, after encouraging Bill to worry himself to the vanishing point.

The truth is, the "outlook" appeared to be a sequel that was natural enough to that fraternity of the snobbish intellectual elite in high school, with whom Bill would later "rule the world," through successful careers, of course. This concept totally ignored the harsh reality of how modern interdependent, "advanced" society, really works. Pragmatism reveals that people are imposed upon, bilked, and taken advantage of, and unquestionably suffer. Nothing gets done without emotional commitment, and what can be termed "unconditional" love, as well as unseen, buried sacrifice.

Self-concept is dual in its nature, but this was not the time of Bill's life to deal with that. Bill had never recognized indignation in people on whose indulgence and blind involvement he found it necessary to depend.

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Bill would have to leave on his journey by two in the afternoon. He would not be the last person to stay with Mark in this dreary bar.

He tapped Mark's shoulder.

Mark remained seated, but glanced up with his intense, wide, incredibly blue eyes. He answered the unasked question.

"I know, Bill. We're in a bar. It's too public a place to discuss anything personal." He extended his leathery hand.

Bill thought, I will no longer cling to Mark, nor wait around to see him so I can feel good about myself. This might be the last time.

Mark had mentioned once that he put up with Bill, to use him for "visuality," as he referred to it. Certainly, he shared Bill's need, to compartmentalize life and hold it at arm's length. No doubt, he gloried in the attention he received.

Mark released Bill's hand. "We'll talk again, later. Meanwhile, would you do me a favor? When you go to work on Monday, retrieve my term paper and coffee cup. I've overlooked them. You can be my repository, and give them care and safekeeping."

So, Bill mused as he strolled out to his car, this will not be the last time, but what will we talk about "later"?

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Of course, Bill knew better, for he had been taught about unconditional love in Sunday School, but he never internalized the subject, and made no attempt to understand it. For the present, he insisted on staying inside himself, and looking at himself as a separate, competitive being.

He could stay free; that is, he could if he was good enough—in his future studies, if not in his current job. During some future crisis, he might come to realize that he could stay free only by being flexible and versatile, by being competent at different kinds of work to earn his living. He would also learn what it meant to work. He would discover that new skills come naturally only when he was involved with others on his own terms, and not just his. That would be an entirely new dimension for him. That was what he would find out whether he still must have his heroes. In part, this would become contingent on their need for him.

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Late in the afternoon after leaving Mark, Bill halted at a Tastee-Freeze on busy US 29 in Warrenton, VA. He refreshed himself with a cup of soft ice cream and his prayers. He prayed regularly, although Mark had frequently insisted that Bill was not serious about his religion. During the whole of the mini-ritual, smoke billowed from behind rolling prairies to the West.

At sunset, Bill's blue Maverick negotiated a series of hairpin turns while maneuvering up a mountain behind Warm Springs, Virginia. Nearby, the branches of trees were nearly bare, sporting only nodules of colorless buds, although it was mid-May. Along the mountainsides, cerise and chartreuse hues began to tint the foliage of the lush, summery Eastern valleys two thousand feet below him

Bill hoped to find remnants of snow when he reached the escarpment crest, situated at the state line. It would be worthy of note to see the ground white in his home turf this late in the season.

In fact, when he turned south on West Virginia 19, he did see bluish-white mounds, shaped like molars, which blinded him momentarily with their sparkle from his headlights. He would never know what those objects were. An endless front line of conifers trailed along the right-of-way, some close by, and others further back, behind stretches of open meadows.

Ridges behind the trees still looked intact in the gleaming moonlight. But there was no one around to "do him".

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On Saturday morning, a great machine-carved high wall of rock looked on one of the ridges south of Beckley, West Virginia. Hardtopped West Virginia 99 seemed to be headed directly toward it. However, the road veered to the right, and then started winding up a ridge, through blast-cuts, in string-narrow switchbacks.

Soon, needle-like pillars of stone lined the road, their vertical cross-sections exposing soft dark strata. The needles could have been more natural, like those in the Black Hills of South Dakota, or they could have been create by crafty restorations after strip-mining operation.

Scenic vistas overwhelmed him from all directions. He saw spacious valleys, deep green hollows with little scars along the banks, where grassy benches protruded below the bare, shaved rock, and rugged cliffs. He had to admit it didn't look very bad; his mountains were still acceptable. The make-believe goodwill of American enterprise and industry still seemed intact and credible.

A construction detour shunted him into the hamlet of Holden, west of Logan. Hillsides behind the village converged into a gigantic cofferdam of mud, slag, and black dirt. Mountain folk, hanging out of their shack windows, couldn't direct him back to the highway. In all likelihood, they had never been that far themselves. He had to find his own way, losing valuable time in making his appointment in Prestonburg, Kentucky.

On leaving Logan County, he wondered whether hillbillies had laughed at him, mocking him as a city slicker. Actually, he didn't care. In college, though, he would not have given it so much as a thought. Perhaps he was maturing (his father had once said that in a different, more intimate context). Nothing else would explain entertaining reflections such as this.

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Randy, a living soul from Bill's earlier past, stood on the porch at the Plantation Motel in the cardiac innards of Prestonburg, Kentucky. White colonial columns nearly hid his spare figure, since he stood behind them under a roof for protection from drenching late spring rain. Naively loyal, Randy the

traditionalist was observing a possibly final, and certainly a singular appointment. Bill had assumed he would be there, and never thought otherwise.

Bill considered Randy to be a nice, ordinary guy, who could be depended upon as easily as he could be taken for granted. Whenever Bill wrote Randy, Randy would respond, which was not always the case with other chums from school. Randy's tread fell softly in academics. He had done everything as he was ordered to, and had been amply rewarded with X numbers of degrees, and a serene job as a pedagogue of higher learning.

Randy had been Bill's last roommate, his sidekick before Bill completed graduate school. For someone who demanded privacy, Bill found getting along with Randy a pleasurable affair.

Randy did not compete with anyone or anything. He was decent, psychologically submissive, and more than a bit bland. Conventional attitudes confined all he said or did. Once he had said that US atrocities in Vietnam could be officially excused because war is war (tautology), and that as that, in spite of My Lai demonstrating the contrary. In public, he was known as a pleasant and amiable person. He permitted Bill to indulge in his self-indulgent discussions about the uselessness of the subjects they were studying. They were circumscribed intellectual pursuits which government—in this case the Democrats—had granted them military deferments to absorb, while earthier men bled and fired and victimized themselves in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

Bill looked forward to visiting with Randy, since Bill would have an opportunity to show off his special world. Randy would be an agreeable, cooperative audience.

Today, Randy looked muscular and acted wholesome. As a listener and conversationalist, he was entirely too smooth, and had little to say. Long ago, Bill had made up his mind he would never identify with Randy, and this determination was confirmed now.

Likewise, Randy was not vulnerable; Bill would never have any reason to have to take care of him. At least, thought Bill, Randy would be an ally in validating his personal noncommittal stance, not giving into courtship or a pursuit that could be deceptive, undermining, hostile and confusing. Randy's last letter had mentioned that he was dating a girl, but this would not be remarkable. Randy was surely too stereotyped not to be trapped by female tenderness.

The two men enjoyed a hot lunch and each other's company in the plain motel coffee shop. The somewhat sour, hot roast beef sandwiches even tasted elegant. Phlegmatic, athletic Randy indulged heartily, while Bill was brusque in his manner, if talkative in his behavior, to make this seem like a businessman's special arrangement.

Bill trailed Randy's gold Duster on winding back roads in Eastern Kentucky. They forged through driving rain to Pikeville, on the lower Levisa Fork of the Big Sandy, where they had reserved economical accommodations.

The drive itself became an exciting chase up and down rainswept, forested hills, an through ground-level loud banks. In several places, one lane of asphalt was washed full of mud, creating unexpected hazards.

Their Pikeville host greeted them with a gravelly voice, and was obviously a crusty, unpretentious old codger who appeared to take life in stride. He spoke haltingly, his broken pace enforced by frequent shifts of an enormous cud of chewing tobacco.

“O, yeah! They’ve augured out all of the hills ‘round hyar. You cain’t ee too damned much. Hell, it growed back, so it doesn’t show.” Karr-u-uggg! He cleared his throat and spat a stream that would have brought on a landslide if it had landed in the right place.

Bill suddenly mused, only married couples run small motels, so how come... He remembered how Motel 6 would hire only couples.

Ka-a-ppp-poooot! Another expectoration made its mark. “Ah reckon you an’t no mining engineer, or you wouldn’t be wondering ‘bout it. It goes on all around hyar.”

Bill said, “I hope most of it is underground.”

“Yeah, they underground some of it, but there’s a heap of strippin’ goin’ on.”

The old timer began blaring his knowledge out with arrant bradggadocio, while they filled out the standard motel registration forms. Randy insisted on filling out a separate slip, even though they were to share a twin-bedded double.

Bill went on. “Has it gotten any worse here lately?”

The owner knit his brows. “Y’damn right. All the young folks are movin’ away. They want kicks and high stepping. They don’t show up in this town much any more. Sort of surprises me.”

“This isn’t what I mean. I only want to find out whether the strip mining is going deeper, like the news reports are putting out. We’re here just to look around, interested in the environment.”

The bewhiskered landlord cut him short. “Noboyd hyar will ‘ppreciate that. We feel we can take care of ourselves. Don’t warm up to outsiders spyin’ ‘em out.”

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Bill rode around with Randy in the incessant, pelting downpour that continued all afternoon. They wound up be degrees through more green hills to Breaks Interstate Park near Elkhorn City. They looked over the famous gorge, and the Towers, which are the natural twin totem poles looming in the valley. A toylike locomotive sat motionless on tracks scarcely discernible through the drizzle, on the other side of the greensward.

Randy whipped out his moderately expensive camera.

Click!

Bill shook his head. “You won’t get any picture in this soup,” he commented, “except soup.”

Next, they proceeded southwest into Virginia through the spectacular, rounded ridges with Randy still obligingly at the wheel. At times, Bill saw areas on hillsides that were raked nude, like mudbanks, but none of the terrain had been truly devastated.

Perhaps it won’t be so bad, after all, Bill thought.

They rode through several dingy towns, and at Haysel turned onto Virginia 83, which led them to a high plateau. To their right, a sign “Cumberland Scenic Trail” held the promise of forthcoming vistas, so they drove Clincho and Fremont.

The murky rain pattered harder and harder. This was the open road, the kind of world Bill loved to see. It would be here forever, at least any multiples of his own lifespan, if it were not disturbed, even if Mark was actually gone and inaccessible.

Their climb took them higher and higher. Now, they were confronted with more of those muddy cuts. They looked like bleeding sores on the landscape. One had a wide, open mouth, pitted with raw manmade wounds where nature had been gashed by greedy men. After another right-angle turn, the shattering horror of it all struck Bill full in the chest.

Here the ridge was butchered, completely naked, except for one isolated stretch of dead trees which protruded from a bypassed platform of soil.

Randy was no longer a placid observer content with platitudes.

“It’s a God-awful thing!” he blurted indignantly, fumbling his camera. “The death watch of our time.”

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Not far from where they halted, a truck stood in the muck below the clifflike declivity obscured by fog and rain. The equipment was immobilized at the scene of the disaster it had helped create. Randy took snapshots of the machine, the rocky debris, shattered tree limbs, and ravaged landscape.

Bill said, “If these pictures turn out, send me a few prints, will you?”

“Oh, sure. I’ll be glad to do that. You can count on me. But, I’m surprised you didn’t bring your own.”

“My Brownie Hawkye broke. They yanked it around when I got ‘caught’ trespassing about a year ago around Mount Storm. Well, only last week, I got a magazine called Green Lands from the Strip Mining and Reclamation Association, showing all the splendid rebuilding the coal companies do for the environment. It’s a parody of what’s going on here.”

Randy agreed. “Probably published by the strip-miners themselves,” he remarked with notable irony. Since he did not believe in “they” anymore, for a change he acted aptly and appropriately cynical.

They were headed now for Norton, Virginia, skimming along US 23, labeled as “The Trail of the Lonesome Pine.” High banks along the highway yielded to distant views of the mayhem perpetrated on the mountains. Whole chunks were chewed from ridges that were capriciously cut away. Some of them had been haled, and spilled out of their viscera. Disfigurements were rampant everywhere, and Bill gaped at them. Man’s war with his heritage was evident in every scene. Bill wondered whether he was overreacting. Was it possible that the damage was basically only cosmetic, and not fundamental? Were these only skin abrasions, or could they be fatal assaults on the integrity of Mother Earth, a permanent harm inflicted on her primeval state? Even a human being could accept only so much skin injury – burns or flaying – and still live.

Randy observed Bill closely from his command post in the driver's seat. Randy was smiling. Bill resented it, because it puzzled him. Randy never used to smile like that. It was an indulgent grin, not a pleasantry. Exactly what was meant by it, anyway?

Bill's mind began reverting to all sorts of past personal situations, then wandered back again to the devastation they had seen. He suddenly realized that even the strip-mining periodical divulged that coal companies practiced "mountaintop removal", which consisted of leveling the site of a recent operation. Certainly, such a procedure would alter and not preserve the topography.

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The travelers enjoyed dinner at an old plantation house converted to a tourist restaurant. It featured fresh, homemade full course dinners that make mouth-watering double spreads in cookbooks dealing with culinary artistry, and even in those women's magazines of the 1950s that Bill shouldn't have noticed so much. They both chose a chicken specialty with wild rice and roasted vegetables, to be served with apple bread and hand churned butter.

While they were waiting for these delectable to be produced to order, Bill and Randy had time to share.

Bill tapped his cut glass idly with a fork. It made a soft, charming, ringing sound that served as a backdrop for what he had to say.

"You know, in a moment like this, I wish I had a girl... the one of my dreams, but not fantasies, you understand. Funny, but that was on my mind a couple day before last Christmas, when I had dinner with my good friend Mark and his new wife and instant family. They immensely enjoyed having me over. It should have been an evening for themselves, so to speak, but I wasn't regarded as a threat. It was like entertaining someone who was already part of the group, because he emulated the key person in it. I felt at home. Yet, it was hard to take 'alone'. I wanted to have a partner with me on an occasion like that, but I wanted one that I didn't depend on, or especially crave. You realize what I mean."

"Well, not exactly. I depend on Karen. That's got a lot to do with why I date her. I find I need her presence to enjoy things. No doubt she's made a few significant changes in me, and that's all for the good. I've benefitted from them, I know."

Bill nodded. "I think I mean something else. I am referring to companionship in less than an intimate sense—an identification on an impersonal level, or perhaps not so much as that, but a mere idealization, an image to admire." Bill paused and tapped on the glass lightly again. "I idolized Mark. In the elementary grades, I remember we attended a Bible school – possible in public school in the Fifties – open on a voluntary attendance basis after hours. We made notebooks and paste-ups. I used to love composing reports of any kind. Our burly spinster teacher asked us to write on the last page any secrets we wished to share with her. In my best cursive penmanship, I confided that 'I have idols.'"

"Well, I don't." Randy's face almost betrayed a frown, but it might have been a fleeting shadow.

While it could have been an embarrassing moment, Bill rattled on to gloss it over. "I used to worry that Mark's last wife would drag him down, at least in the looks department." Yup, I notice men's bodes. "You've seen it, and I've seen it. Most married men develop a paunch for identification."

“Oh, grow up!” Randy’s disapproval was edged, though concealed in the form of a jovial repost.

Bill ignored it. “Irmie had her great-looking guy, and he never did get soft, or go downhill, even when he got sick and sat around, or became so busy moonlighting at the Giant that he had no time to take care of himself. As for my appearance, Irmie had decided notions. She wanted me to cultivate a beard – no matter if it had streaks of gray – and take on all the accoutrements of a hippy. I wanted to be a model Renaissance man – like Mark, or maybe da Vinci – but I didn’t have what it takes, so she insisted that I should settle for the current next-best-thing mode. After all, balding men can’t expect to look like...”

“Irmie was your girl, then, Bill?”

“No, I’m still talking about Mark’s wife, on lease!” Bill’s eyes snapped. “She care more about me than Joanna did. Joanna was my girl. She didn’t care what I was, and that’s what I half liked about her. I could be or remain anything I wanted. She had no arbitrary standards for macho, for drive, for masculinity, even external trappings or swagger. She dated anybody who could provide her good company. When I gave her the ring, the telephone was hardly off the hook before she was saying yes. I took her to those scheduled Singles’ Club dances. Most of those who attended practiced strict gender segregation. The younger fellows tried to shop talk with each other, while the older women sat around, hoping to be invited for the next dance. We were all tormented by an obnoxious, bellicose, ornery, potbellied bartender, who screamed and laid down a smoke screen with his cigar. It was the stinkiest stogie I ever smelt. The tobacco for it must have been cured in an outhouse. Anyone who got near it was two feet from hell. It was horrible.” He broke off for a moment, reflecting. “Joanna always had a good time. She waltzed or rumba-ed around, imitating a Virginia reel. She loved to step out on the floor with any man, even the bartender. Nothing mattered to her then. She had no preferences.”

“Well, Bill, I guess I know what you’ve been doing since we were grad school roommates.” He set down his napkin. “This has been an interesting day.” He didn’t seem to need decompression yet

“What did you think of the strip-mining?”

“Well, I was shocked, but not surprised. Why should I be surprised? I’ve already been told about it, heard what was happening, you know. I believe you wrote me by mail about it yourself. Id rhe world is going to keep on living like this, it’s going to decimate our resources. It just has to be this way. It’s inevitable. We don’t have any options, do we?”

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After dinner, Randy drove Bill fifty miles back to their motel. They traversed ribboned macadams meandering through the wooded hills; they flouted the unrelenting rain. Bill continued to talk compulsively, but not about himself. He slipped back into the Vietnam-era awareness of self-worth, bolstered by inner complacency.

“So, Randy, you’re just going to put yourself into the rat race with both feet, then go through the formal rigormarole of earning a Ph. D., merely for the useless satisfaction of having it?”

Randy did not take umbrage to the remark. “Bill, you can say what you want to. It’s all about the point of view. I agree that there’s probably no future in college teaching, but there’s no college teaching job without the required credentials.” Come on, this is not contraposition. Randy began to

subside into a more docile mood, typical of his old phlegmatic self. “Anyway, all that useless math, as you used to call it, has got its merits. Everything that happens to you can be neatly mapped out with the help of Locke and Ovid and Baruch Spinoza.”

“That isn’t so, but do you really like studying if any better than you used to? You wrote once that life ought to entertain, and you can’t expect to find unlimited amusement if you confine yourself to books all the time. Values change.”

“Oh, I have my fun.”

“Randy, do you expect a bookish existence is going to give you all you’re going to want out of life? Is that going to give you the good times you hope to have?” Bill was tempted to accuse Randy of a lack of self-assurance, turning the tables, to challenge him with not being able to succeed outside the academic world. He decided it would be best not to goad him. He kept the comment to himself.

“It’s like this, Bill. Karen has a son. The boy hankers for my attention. He wants a father, and he’s desperate for a man to look up to. I’m that man. To give him guidance, I have to feel good about what I’m doing.”

Bill thought, you mean, you have to accept yourself as you are. You have to justify what you’ve turned into.

Diplomatically, Bill inquired, “Why can’t you do what you’d like to do, and still care for a family? Why can’t you do both? Is there any reason why not? I realize the academic scene, the university and its cadre, and contrived concept of existing as a separate community, are entirely artificial and irrelevant to what is actually going on. I used to say that when we were roommates, and you...”

“All right, but I have to prove my faith, Bill. I can’t do that and still have my own way. At the moment, that’s all I understand. I have to follow through with the situation as it is.”

“I thought things might be different, once you were your own boss.”

“Nobody is ever his own boss, completely.”

“Did you ever have the urge to make a stab at it?”

“Bill, let’s try another subject for a change. I have a surprise coming for you tonight. Another one, anyway. Something you don’t expect.”

“No matter what you may say right now, Randy, you have to admit you got excited about what we saw today. You reacted! That’s great. You were afraid, then you were angry—or at least indignant—even at me. Aren’t you aware you never used to react to anything? Today, you came alive. Maybe you didn’t need to do it through the Lord, but you were a new person.”

“Something happened. I admit it. I even have a set of pictures to remind me that I was stirred up.”

“You can take the film home with you. I hope it will be the start of a large collection. You’ve earned the right to go on with this experience.”

“Bill, let me tell you that I’m going to take on a new interest, besides math.”

“Like what? Photography?”

“I mean carpentry.”

“Carpentry? How? Where? Why? That’s the sort of thing that fellows who didn’t stay in school to duck the draft have to do.”

“When I leave these mountains and get back home, I am going to settle down. I’m determined to make myself useful in a practical way. I’ll quit driving around and sightseeing like you do.”

“Randy, at heart, you are a loner like me. You go for beautiful landscapes. If you could afford them, you’d have a houseful of paintings by Albert Bierstadt. Anyway, you learned something by being with me today. You said so yourself. You were actually excited, or agitated.”

“Well, when I finally saw it, I got agitated...”

“The mutilations?” That didn’t mean cattle mutilations.

“... I’ve been prepared for it. Our lives have got to change.”

“Randy, you seem to be in charge now. You’re not the same stoic soul.”

“Yes, Bill, I’m in command. Even between you and me.”

“You’ll still complete the work for your degree?”

“Of course. I like to study math when I’m alone. It affords solace and satisfaction, aesthetic values. Even God can’t change mathematical theorems.”

“To each his own. I’m going to feel a lot more, now, with a best friend pulling out. Right now, I’m considering the prospect with pleasure.”

“I hope you like being by yourself. I like it myself. However, I’ve got to give up being spoiled. So have you.”

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For the rest of the wild night ride, they were silent. Bill thought about an orchestral passage late in Arnold Schoenberg’s “Gurrelieder”.

Bill thought, I made this expedition to be in permanent charge of things. Today, I took an old friend to another planet, found that he knew more about alien living environments than I did, and now maybe I want to keep and develop that friendship.

He reflected further, to days of reading Robert Louis Stevenson in high school. What is my future going to be given to? It seems to come down to a choice between chasing heroes, taking our girls I won’t allow to be important to me, or seeing myself as a “success” in a job that meets with my satisfaction. It has to be like that, or nothing. I’m not ready to latch on to anything else.

An omniscient observer would wonder, why is potential procreation so meaningless to Bill? Was “it” always about him?

Bill told himself that other options didn't exist. He saw no challenge in being "only" a computer programmer or "coder" for the government; nothing ever went into production. Nothing even had to be right (unless there really was another necessary war). Ultimate responsibility did not exist in such work. Maybe it did for an auto mechanic, whose screw-up could cause a tragedy down the road.

Two days before The Last Day of Mark, Bill had talked to two professors at the University of Maryland himself. Probably he could beat Mark at the Last Degree because Mark was duly bound to his instant family, and he knew he could surely crowd out Randy. It was easy, and fun, to idolize anyone whom he would someday both imitate and surpass. It was, in a sense, paying homage to his own ego to do it.

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When they arrived at their motel, Randy rushed into their room. He came out with another large key.

"We really have grown up," Bill remarked

"Come over to my room in ten minutes."

-18-

When Bill knocked on Randy's door, he was nervous. This surprised him. He had never thought he would care about Randy in any but a superficial way, nor had he expected to see Randy after this expedition was over.

Randy opened up. Before, Bill had paid little attention to the wonderfully developed, smooth, muscled torso, as noble as a young Greek god's. The total absence of hair on his chest went well with the light coat of down on his forearms, but curiously, Randy's legs seemed more hirsute than what Bill recalled from dorm days.

The big surprise was Karen. She stood before his roommate, only slightly shorter.

"Bill, I'd like you to meet my fiancée, Karen."

Bill's eye caught a rectangular solid, perhaps a crib, from the corner of the room. Did instant fatherhood make men more or less masculine?

Bill then swallowed hard. This introduction had to be more than a mere formality. Obviously, it had been carefully planned, and neatly executed. Where had Karen (and more) hid out all day?

Just like Mark, Randy was leaving, too. It was a traumatic moment, since unlike Mark, Randy had not mattered until he was away.

Karen was substantial and attractive. Long black hair, and glasses imparted an intellectual, brainy look to her otherwise delicate features. Randy clasped around her about the waist, pressing her cheeks together with warm affection.

She said, "You'll have to come out to Illinois and visit us, when we get our new city finished."

"What kind of city? A model or toy?"

“A self-sufficient intentional community, Bill, a prototype of the future. It will be the kind of place where those who live there can be exactly what they please to be, without undermining others who share it with them. It will be grand for people like you. Bill. You’d fit in perfectly. In fact, we need you, to make our existence more complete. Think about it, won’t you?”

Karen came through as a bright and personable spirit who had all the answers, a sort of Miranda. She was clearly expecting Randy to reinforce, and enforce, them.

Bill confronted Randy with a challenge. “Do you really want to live like that? The reason you’ve done things is because you believe you’re supposed to. You want to conform. Is this actually any different?”

Karen bragged, “Of course it is. Randy’s so calm and serene by nature, it’s unbelievable; but I’ve made him wake up.” Oh, Choleric precedes Phlegmatic. “He’s a lively lad now. Born again.”

“I’ve won a convert out of him this myself this weekend,” Bill interposed, like his King was in check from a bishop.

“Bill,” Karen continued, “You must wonder. Could you, or even I, have made Randy change?”

“I can only show him the world that I know, and feel good that I can do that.”

“Don’t you think something must have happened to him beyond his control? Something that made him change?”

“I wouldn’t have thought of that. I’d like to think my own life is on the way up,” Bill continued.

Her smile was wooden and devoid of mirth. “Bill, you’ve got to learn to get aroused by something more vital than the aesthetics of mountains getting torn down or taken apart. People are being shaved down, dissected, too, every day, and it’s the living organisms that finally count.”

Bill then responded, or perhaps rebutted. “Well, I have idols. People idols. Men.” In the presence of some, but not Randy (but Mark) I can get sexually excited. “But I’ll have to become more dynamic myself.” He pursed his lips to emphasize his words.

Randy broke in, interrupting. “So, maybe you should indulge in people, in social work, in ...”

“Got to get close to somebody real,” Bill said curtly.

“You need to,” Randy replied, “if you’re ever going to be good at anything. To accomplish and achieve, you need someone worthwhile to stand with you and watch your back.” They call that social capital.

Bill would not let it go at that. He came back a little warmly. “People can get taken apart, too, just like the hills. Maybe in surgery. The process is equally as ruthless. In all honesty, all that I find of interest is the kind of situation I can probably do something about. These hills are at the mercy of men, and I am one of the species. To ignore our surroundings is only perpetuating and projecting our personal insecurity. If I can do something for the vulnerable mountains. I am helping people. The future depends on men and nature working in harmony.”

“All right, Bill,” Karen said, in a transparent effort to brush him off. “Go out an recruit, round up all the powerful supporters you can, and get the job done. Is it useless to try to do it alone. Can’t you see that? A lot of people can’t tolerate watching you crusade all by yourself, but it seems that’s what you’ve deliberately set out to do. It doesn’t add up very well, that’s all.”

Randy completed the observation with one of his own. “When Karen and I are through in Stelle, Illinois, we’ll build another city in the mountains – in the real mountains – the ranges out West. It’s just the kind of place you love. Real property. You’ll really be welcome to visit us then.”

“So,” Bill interjected, “you really haven’t given up the cause, after all. You’re going to return to the mountains.”

“Yes, if you’d enjoy seeing me again some day,” concluded Randy.

All the sudden, a wail came from the manger in the back. Karen walked back, picked up the baby, and brought him to Bill.”

“He’s not mine.”

“But he’ll take to you,” Karen said. As Bill took hold of the kid, the cry stopped. *We have to deal with all these kids.*

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On Sunday morning, Bill saw Randy and Karen, nursing Ben, long enough to part company, with proper amenities. But now the couple was pleasant and patronizing. From now on, Bill would see them as a single unit, as an indivisible personality, as one soul. Randy had experienced his last day of total independence. The wedding would take place the following Saturday. Bill did not need to be invited.

Probably, the couple -- instant family -- would drive through Kentucky, enjoying the Daniel Boone National Forest, in route to Illinois. On the way, they would watch Appalachia fade out slowly. In the flat, useful corn country of the Midwest, they would abandon society, and society would abandon them. They would settled down to respectable self-sufficiency, raise another generation, and become, like sea squirts, sessile, it not senile, some day.

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Bill’s four-hundred-mile drive home to Washington was mental fun. Mark’s term paper and coffee up waited for him there, and these objects guaranteed they would be getting together at least once, however briefly, in the next few days. This anticipation would postpone any immediate inner reform.

Bill saw more strip-mine exposure, but nothing that he found overwhelming; they weren’t too bad; the high walls became less frequent as he departed the Cumberland, leaving the behind for the Alleghenies and then the more familiar Ridge and Valley Province, leading to the Shenandoah.

For a moment, he was tempted to drive back up to the Monngahela National Forest, where he could view the spectacular mountain country while it lasted and remained, but he realized at once it was too far out of the way, though he would have liked to see the alpine plant life, and corn snow on the ground in mid May.

He took one short hike, from where the road crested on another ordinary ridge. From there, he inspected the woody, humpy territory. He remembered how he used to play with his Mars electric train set (HO), building his own expanses of crepe mountains, wire trees, and cities full of plastic toys, indeed, he manufactured topographies as if by order. His mother had once called it "baby play". In time, he would learn that artists did the same with holograms.

Perhaps his wandering through these mountains was a special way of refurbishing his world of make-believe. It was not a real world anymore, since the strip-miners were levelling these ridges with larger and larger Muskies, probing deeper for larger seams of coal, reducing the magnificent elevations from 4,000 to 3,500, to 3,000... It's what Isaiah had prophesized about bringing the mountains low.

He sighed and turned away.

On Monday morning, he reported again to the routine government job that held him "prisoner". He wore shabby attire. Why not? Mark was not around to be impressed, so he might as well stay in his cheapest clothes.

Now, he would rebuild his life with the materials of external things. He would become a person like other persons, a speck in the integrated mass of humanity.

He had rediscovered himself in the whole by becoming a part of it again. He had himself back together again.

