

FRESHMAN AT REED 1960

There are times when memory of my youth reveals some condition that I can see would be difficult for a young person of this time to grasp. There are obvious things, like the absence of television. My family got its first when I was ten. Will my grandchildren be able to sense what that was like before its advent? The book-reading and radio dramas and comic books? Then there are cultural shifts, like the way I adored Western heroes and wanted nothing more than a fast-draw cap gun. Or it strikes me how hard it will be to explain to my grandchildren what the Cold War was or why I had recurring dreams of nuclear war. The story I'm going to tell here has a more dramatic feature that has retired into the 'gone world'. In 1960 Mt. St. Helens was a perfectly conical snow-covered peak beloved by anyone who lived in the Northwest. It had that kind of perfection of shape that makes Fujiyama strike deep chords. Nestled in its shoulders was the pristine Spirit Lake, from whose eastern end one could gaze back at the dramatic peak leaping up directly above the lake. It was surrounded by lush forest with a dreamy undergrowth of salmonberries & blueberries. When I first saw it from the lodge at the east end where Reed College took its incoming freshman class for an 'Orientation', I declared inwardly that it was the most beautiful place in the world. Several times in the following two decades I went back there just to see it and walk along that lake, and I never edited that teen-ager's opinion. Imagine how it felt to see the film of Mt. St. Helens exploding and the Lake obliterated forever. That a whole landscape will never exist again except in photographs. And in memories. How to explain to my granddaughter that Spirit Lake, the most beautiful place on earth, was where I met my first great love?

The college had reserved space on a single Southern Pacific train that originated in Los Angeles and would take everyone along the way in California up to Portland. So my parents drove me to the depot in Berkeley not far from Spenger's fish restaurant, to meet the train. There were a dozen or so nervous 'new hires' waiting for destiny to sweep them up to the fabled utopian college. I had several anxieties. One being that I had just turned seventeen and looked fifteen. I was going to feel like a kid at this place. Another of course was leaving parents and family & friends behind. Before prevalent air travel, Portland seemed very far. Then there was the intellectual fear, that I was not a good enough student. Or the cultural fear of being uncool, not knowing what was deepest and furthest-out in the world of ideas, which was definitely part of Reed's aura.

Something happened at that depot that I only recently understood had broken the fears away. My father was making minimal conversation with filler questions like *'did you remember to pack enough socks..?'* I was a little embarrassed and not paying attention. Then he tapped me on the shoulder and bent over to discreetly gesture towards a young woman standing alone on the dock.

"That slender gal...?" He said *sotto voce*. *"She's a knockout."* On matters of feminine allure I completely trusted him. Completely. None of that *OH dad, damn it, get out of my head!* No, this was sublime, our best awareness of each other. *See what she gives off in the morning breeze? That one, she's terrific.* It had the effect of making everything else secondary. The instruction was: be a young man.

The eighteen hours on that train were charged with impressions. The Los Angeles students were already sorted out into friendships and flirtations and sprawling intense discussions. There were people who had been active in Ban the Bomb marches and fledgling student radical groups. There was mention of the Beatnik writers, Mort Sahl routines and science fiction. All the fears I mentioned came true in one sense.. I was much younger and I did feel everyone was smarter. I knew what they were talking about but felt shy to enter the tilts. It wasn't long before I found myself searching for the Knockout. I made the most of our accidental brush-ups and wound up sitting next to her for hours. He was so right! Not just pretty but she had a wicked sly mind and an interest in things not usually considered. By the time we got to Portland, I was hooked. Was she?

It became clear when we arrived at the Lodge at Spirit Lake that the ‘orientation’ was more like a chance to make friends and maybe to find a girlfriend before the older guys who were ‘hosting’ swooped in like falcons. There was a moment when I saw her flirting with the sophomore food-server in the lodge. Had to get her off on a walk with me, had to be alone with the One. A long walk in the firs and up to an old mine shaft. Blueberries just ripe. I put my hand to her waist on the way back. It was dreamy. Blueberries, Mt. St. Helens...and this girl who grinned at me. We did end up as a couple, & it lasted for months. She was the first true grown-up-feeling romance of my life.

Grown-up because nothing was to stop us from going all the way. The school was famously bohemian and there were many secluded places along the creek and wooded zones of the campus. But as heady as that was, it was also an exposure. I didn’t know how to gracefully take both of us past our virginities. We had some intense make-outs and were going crazy for each other. But she couldn’t trust me enough, she wasn’t swept off her feet enough for it to happen. Instead we experienced increasing awkwardness, moments of estrangement that led off into mind warps and melancholy reflection until by Thanksgiving break I was very wrought up. We thought we should break up. I had some moments when I felt suddenly I could easily die. An unemotional morbidity. *This* might be the end. ...so easy it seemed. How can I explain that to myself now?...I was only seventeen.

There was a time with two other friends when we stayed up all night talking and trying to understand what we were reading of the Upanishads. My girlfriend had the knack of ‘going deeper’. She would let a metaphysical conversation go just so far before she’d say...*no...It’s not even that*. Her face was receding into trance. I started thinking out loud about all we had said: “*so... the mind and psyche are just layers of roles and might be described like an onion. And Lynn says there is a universal core of all our souls, the Atman... then if I sit right here and peel off layers, eventually? Like, there’s this layer doing the talking right now: rational, friendly, analytic prose. The describer, the Explainer. But just below him is a boy who doesn’t really know the words for all this and who is more primal and innocent & guilty too. But below that little fellow I have my dreaming self, the eternal soul of no age which houses the Imagination and seethes with stories and streets of a thousand inhabited planets. But below this perceiver of multiplicity is the one-mind knower who is calm and patient and feels at one with the one. But.*” & she broke in on me: “*It’s not even that*” and called out sharply, almost a shriek. She was shaking and staring in long distance. I said, *yeah, it’s not that, that’s just words...what we’d have to do is to completely BE in that mind, no words, no qualms, just dive in...*and at that point I ‘saw’ something that stunned me. A roaring turbine of energy. Not in a place nor bound as in a film, but infinite because not visible. Just a dynamo of pulsation and seething Forms. At that moment, Lynn spoke sharply, and the mood broke as we turned and realized she was nearly fainting with disconnection. I had a pang of annoyance. A moment where I really wanted to *dive in*. A glimpse of what it would mean, to be out of one’s physical self and moving in mind... to be irretrievably mad ...? but she needed comforting and the three of us stood up and took her out in the night air. I walked her to the dorm and kissed her goodnight. But we were at the edge of what could happen between us at 17 & 18 yrs old.