

A Quiet Mountain Town

Snow drifted down onto the Blue Mountains, into the small valley huddled between ridges thick with ponderosa and lodgepole pine, Douglas and white fir, western larch, and groves of aspen, into the town of 150 people, one bar, one restaurant, one store, and a service station.

Midway through the brief afternoon, snow quit falling, but dark clouds still hung close above the mountain. State plows roared through town and threw three feet of snow into the air and off the road. I shoveled through the high berm of snow they left behind, and I shoveled my walkway clear.

Midnight, restless from long enclosure, I shut the door behind me, stood on the front porch, and looked at the thermometer in light from the street lamp. Ten degrees below zero.

Someone started a car, drove out of the parking lot of the bar, and down the highway. Light from headlights fanned out across the snow and lighted up part of the night.

My brother, Gordon, had parked his pickup at the bar. I crossed the road, thinking I might go in and talk with him, but when I got closer, I decided not to. I don't go in bars much. I don't fit very well with the people, with the atmosphere in bars. I'd talk with Gordon some other time.

A mercury-vapor lamp high on a wooden pole shed artificial moonlight and a loud buzzing sound over the parking area and the snow plowed into jagged piles along two sides. Clouds obscured the stars. I almost stepped on a full, sixteen ounce bottle of Coca Cola lying in the snow at the edge of the parking lot. I picked up the bottle, put it in the pocket of my insulated coveralls, and started to walk on by.

Bob walked out the front door of the bar, with Leland behind him and then a guy I didn't know. Bob turned around and said, "You guys wanna fight? Anybody wanna fight?"

Leland said, "Cut it out Bob. Nobody wants to fight."

Gordon followed them out. Bob asked him, "What about you? You wanna fight? You lookin for a fight?"

Gordon said, "No, I don't wanna fight."

Bob saw me and walked toward me. "Do you wanna fight?" he asked.

I said, "No. I sure don't. I don't fight."

He still walked toward me. I didn't handle it right. It's been years since I've been around drunk people. I said, "About all I

could do would be to hit you with this bottle of Coca Cola I found by the road.”

I thought he'd see I meant it as a joke and also as a measure of how much I didn't want to fight, that I'd use a deadly weapon to avoid getting into a fight, but he said, “Well, get your coke bottle ready then,” and he kept walking toward me.

I thought I should draw the bottle and get ready to try to lay him down, but I couldn't do it, because I thought, if I hit this guy with this glass bottle full of coke, I might mess him up really bad or kill him, and I couldn't deal with that. So I said, “No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to fight.” I showed him the palms of my hands. I didn't see his fist coming. He hit me and knocked me down, and I skidded backward on the snow and ice.

I got up and Bob stepped close and hit me twice again, and I hit the ground harder and slid farther.

Leland said, “Cut it out, Bob. Cut it out. That's enough.” He danced around in front of Bob with his arms spread, like a basketball player trying to stop an opponent. Bob swung at him, but Leland stayed just out of reach, and Bob punched empty air and almost fell down.

Gordon said, “Come on Bob, cut it out. He said he doesn't wanna fight. Can't you hear what he's saying?” Bob turned around and hit him and knocked him down.

For the first time, I thought maybe I could hit Bob. I got up and said, “What's the matter with you, Bob? Can't you hear everybody say they don't want to fight? Nobody wants to fight. Nobody wants to fight. Shut it down.”

He came after me, and I still couldn't bring myself to hit him. He knocked me down again, and I skidded halfway under a pickup parked there. I lay on the hard, cold ice, trying to recover my senses. I rolled from under the pickup and started to get up, but I saw Bob's knees in front of me, and I stayed halfway down until he turned and went after someone else. Then I got up.

Bob came after me again. I stepped around the pickup, and I kept some distance between us.

I said, “Nobody made any move against you. If you have to fight, find somebody who wants to fight. There's nothing heroic about beating up on people who won't fight back. Nobody wants to fight.” He came after me, but he didn't give catching me his best, or he was too drunk to do it well, and he didn't catch up with me again.

Leland kept after him. “Come on Bob. That's enough. You got enough trouble already. You're going to cause yourself more trouble. Nobody wants to fight. Slow down and listen.

Nobody wants to fight.”

Leland and the guy I didn't know finally convinced him. They got into Bob's pickup and drove away down the highway.

Gordon and I stood in the parking lot with snow and ice all around and a dark sky above us. I said, “I'm going to call the sheriff.”

Gordon said, “Yeah, I guess that's what we should do.”

“I am anyway. I'm not going to try to beat it into his head, but I do have to know I can walk through town without getting knocked flat.”

“Yeah. I'll go with you. I guess I'd better file charges too.”

“We could go tell his wife about it, and she could tell him when he comes home, so he has a chance to pack his toothbrush.”

We walked down past the store and up the side street. What noises there were, that time of night, we heard them from a long ways away. My face, my head hurt. The path to the front door of Bob's place hadn't been shoveled, just walked on and packed down. I knocked. Gloria opened the door about six inches. I said, “Did Bob come home yet?”

“No.”

“He knocked people around up in the Elkhorn parking lot, and I want him to know I'm going to call the sheriff and file charges.”

“Sounds like Bob. This door won't open any farther. The refrigerator's in the way. You could come around to the other door.”

“No. I just want to let him know. I'm not going to try to fight him, but I have to be able to walk through town without getting knocked around. I thought I'd talk to him about it, but that's probably a waste of time.”

“If he comes home now, he'll still be drunk. I don't think it would do any good to try to talk to him when he's drunk.”

“I'm going to go down to the phone and call now.”

“I'll tell him, but I don't know when he'll be back.”

We walked back down toward the highway and met Bob as he turned his pickup to head up the hill. He stopped, opened the door, and sat in the driver's seat looking at us. I said, “What's on your mind now?”

“Not much. Just wondered what you guys are doing.”

I said, “How the hell is anyone supposed to get you to stop if you get it into your head you're going to bash them and they don't want to fight? What do you suggest we do?”

“I don't know. Maybe you should go get a gun and shoot me.”

I said, “That might be a good idea, but I don't fight because

I don't like violence, and shooting you would be violent."

"Maybe you should carry a big sign that says, 'I don't fight.' Maybe you should talk to me when I'm sober. I do have a drinking problem. That has something to do with what happened."

"I'm not going to wait to try to find you when you're sober and try to make an agreement for peace that might not even hold the next time you're drunk."

To Gordon, he said, "Well, I'm sorry I hit you. I don't know why I did that. I don't think I even knew who it was, and I like you okay." He turned to me and said, "I don't like you, though. I might decide to do it again, next time I get a chance."

"That ends any doubt I might have had about calling the sheriff."

We walked up the highway. Bob shut the pickup door and drove up the hill toward his place. I called from the pay phone outside the bar and talked to the sheriff.

We got Gordon's pickup and drove up to my place. We went inside, and I took off my hat, scarf, and gloves, and looked at myself in the mirror. I felt worse than I looked. My jaw, neck, shoulder, and back hurt, but most of the damage to my face was under my beard and didn't show. My right cheek was swelling and yellowing with a bruise almost up to my eye.

Gordon sat down in the rocking chair by the front door. He looked worse than I did. Bob hit him high on the face, and the flesh around both eyes puffed up and turned green, blue, and purple.

It took the sheriffs about an hour to drive up the mountain. I invited them in and gave them coffee. The taller, older man, Harold, said, "This isn't the first time Bob's been in trouble for knocking people around."

I told them what I'd said about the coke bottle. "I'm sure that was a stupid thing to say, but after I said it, I told him I wasn't going to try to hit him with it, and I showed him my empty hands." I said, "Maybe I should have tried to hit him. There must be some way to get him to stop." It was easy to almost forget that I had decided I was going to hit him and had been unable to do it.

The short, heavy sheriff, Gene, said, "If you fought him and won, then every time he got drunk, he'd look you up for another fight. If you won every time, he'd keep on fighting you until he won. He'd do anything it took to win. We can pick him up tonight if we can find him, but he'll be out again in the morning. You'll have to come down and sign papers."

I said, "Why don't we come down in the morning and sign papers? You could wait until we're ready to go to court to arrest

him. When we go to court, he'll probably be sober, and he might understand what's happening."

They drove back down the mountain, and Gordon went home.

Soon after first light, I walked up to Gordon's and woke him up. Low, grey clouds threatened the mountain with another snowstorm. Morning's light hung grey and tentative against the mountain. I said, "Are we going to town?"

Gordon pulled his pants and shirt on, walked into the kitchen, and put a coffee pot on the burner. "It's really cold," he said. He stirred up coals in the heater, added wood, and sat close as he put on his insulated boots and his coat. The coffee pot bubbled. I turned the burner down so it wouldn't boil over.

Gordon set the intake and the damper on the heater. He asked, "How cold is it?"

"Twenty below at my place. I didn't look at your thermometer."

He went out onto the front porch and came right back in. "Twenty-four below zero. I knew it was cold."

The flesh around his right eye had swollen almost shut. He looked through a narrow slit. Under his left eye, his skin showed ugly yellow, then purple, and the purple disappeared under his beard. He said, "You want a cup of coffee?"

"Sure."

We waited for the coffee to cool and then drank coffee. Gordon said, "I need some kind of breakfast."

"Let's eat breakfast in town."

"I'm broke."

"I'll buy."

"Bob's okay when he's sober. He doesn't do that when he's sober. He gets drunk, he starts fighting."

For Gordon, getting knocked around in a bar or in the parking lot outside isn't that unusual. He's in bars a lot. He has a beard, and his curly hair sticks straight out from his head, like an afro. He doesn't watch his mouth much when he's drinking.

I said, "How often is he sober?"

"Not very often."

"What's happening? Are you thinking of not filing charges?"

He drank coffee and looked out the window. Thick frost covered the window around the edges and melted slowly as the house warmed up.

"No. I think we should go ahead with it. Last time he got in a fight, it was inside the bar, and he knocked a couple of old ladies down. He wasn't trying to hurt them. He was after Terry, and he didn't even see the women. Then he and Terry tore the

bar up fighting. Maybe it'd slow him down to sit in jail a day or two."

We finished the coffee. Gordon put on more clothes, and we went out to his rig. He said, "It's so cold, it might not start." It turned over and acted like it wasn't going to start, but just before the battery gave up, the engine fired, then took off. We went back in and drank more coffee while the rig warmed up. Then we headed for town.

On the way down the mountain, in the canyon, the highway runs close to the river. Heavy frost coated the pine and fir trees. Clouds cleared, and the sun rose above the ridge southeast of us. Sunlight refracted through the frost on the trees. Hundreds of rainbow-colored circles hung in the trees, and rainbow-colored light radiated out from the circles. Gordon said, "I should have brought my camera." He slowed way down. "We could go back and get it."

"By the time we go get it and come back, the angle of the light will change. The colors won't be here anymore."

"Yeah. You're right. Wow. You don't see that kind of light very often." We rolled along the asphalt road until the rainbow colors disappeared and left frosted trees, the river frozen over on our right, packed snow on the road, the winter sun just above the ridge.

We ate breakfast at the Stockmen's Cafe. The waitress knew Gordon. She looked at us and said, "What do the other guys look like?"

Gordon laughed. I said, "They look okay. No bruises."

She said, "Maybe you guys should carry a big stick."

I said, "I have been giving that idea some thought. A baseball bat might be about right." I thought there I go with coke bottle humor again, that maybe nobody knows is a joke.

We finished our breakfast and drove halfway across town to the sheriff's office. The light inside the building, from rows of fluorescent tubes in the ceiling, hurt my eyes. My head hurt every time I moved, and I thought it would have been a good idea to stay in bed that morning. The sheriff on duty took pictures of us. He said, "By the time you go to court, you won't have bruises anymore. If we have some nice color pictures, it'll help."

When the pictures came out of the camera, he showed them to us. There was something even more impressive about our bruised images in photographs than about our images in a mirror.

He put the pictures into a file folder. He had Gordon sign a complaint. We decided one was enough. Gordon had the worst bruises, so we figured he should be the one to take it to court. I

would be a witness.

We drove back up the mountain.

A warm wind blew across the mountains. Snow on uninhabited houses melted. Snow on roads and hillsides melted. Water ran down the dirt and gravel streets to lower ground and into the creek.

Local people talked about an early spring, but those of us who remembered said two weeks of warmer days and nights and everything melting, and winter would close tight again. Spring came in March or April. We felt the warmth of the January thaw.

Bob stopped me in the parking lot of the store during the warm sunshine of the January thaw. He said, "You go ahead and take this thing to court. I'll beat it. Law of the west says a man can defend himself."

I couldn't think of anything to say.

Marty stopped by my place the day after the cold night of the one-sided fight in front of the bar. He said, "Bob said you guys jumped him with knives, but he fought clear without even getting cut. Is that what happened?"

I shook my head, "No."

"That's what Bob said. He might not know what really happened."

Zero degrees slipped down from the mountain top and settled in the small valley.

Gordon dropped the charges against Bob. He didn't tell me he was going to do it. He just did it. I asked him why, and he shrugged. I didn't say anything else about it. I wondered if I should pursue it on my own. I decided not to. It was too late for me to file charges. I let it die.

I worked for the Garret brothers after winter shut down the woods. I cut and welded steel and built a green chain. We got the mill running, and I pulled lumber from the green chain and stacked it by size. I heard Bob was working up at the Starlight Mine. I didn't see very many people through the winter.

Marty came by Tuesday night, after I got out of the shower. Days and nights had warmed some. Spring was thinking about running winter out of the country. Marty shut the door behind him and said, "Bob won't be knocking anyone around anymore."

I got a strange feeling in my gut, like I'd swallowed something that wouldn't digest.

"He drank a couple hours at the bar at Granite after he got off work. Headin' home, he went off the road this side of the summit. He was thrown out, and the pickup rolled over him."

Snow melted from open areas up to about 6,000 feet. Snow

lingered in timber above 5,000 feet.

Geese, ducks, herons, red winged blackbirds, meadow larks flew into the valley from south. Willow bushes along the streams opened new, green leaves. Western larch trees grew light green needles and brightened the slopes above town.

I drove up and looked at my contract area. Snow lingered on north slope and in thickets where trees shaded the ground, but enough ground had melted off, I could start work. I quit the mill, drove up the mountain, and thinned trees every day. I camped up there a few days at a time when the nights warmed up some.

I saw Gloria around town. She had two kids, Steve, seven, and Tina, five.

I knew I would be hard pressed to meet the Forest Service deadline on my first thinning contract. I drove down to Leland's place and asked him if he wanted two or three weeks' work.

He said, "Sure. I got a road contract coming up June first, but I could work until then. I'm about broke."

"You need an advance?"

"I have to get a new chain for my saw, and gas."

"Fifty dollars? Seventy-five?"

"Fifty bucks would do it."

Late morning sun soaked into me.

Leland said, "You know, Bob was a hell of a good man when he was sober. You couldn't find a better, more generous man when he was sober. He just couldn't handle alcohol. It was alcohol that messed him up."

"Killed him, too."

"That's the truth. Alcohol messed up his life, and then it killed him."

"How're Gloria and her kids making it?"

"They're doing okay. Bob had a good life insurance policy."

"Is she still pretty broken up over his death?"

"I don't think so. She didn't take it too hard. They wouldn't have stayed together. She doesn't have her own teeth in her head anymore, but she took out a few of his teeth, too."

What does anyone really know? I wondered if that might be like Gordon and me jumping Bob with knives. I didn't know.

I saw Gloria around, at the store, at the post office. I tried to strike up a conversation. She wasn't against talking; it was just hard for either of us to know what to talk about.

Maybe my interest included more than just how are you and your kids doing? Single women are rare in a small mountain town. They get hooked up. If they stay single, they usually don't find a way to make a living, so they move to the city.

Even women who aren't single sometimes don't stay in a

small mountain town. You have to like the mountains and not care much about cultural events like concerts or even movies. You have to want to be with a man who can make it without a steady job, on Forest Service contracts, fighting forest fires in the summer, selling firewood, odd jobs, occasional construction, whatever comes along.

Maybe you have to cut some firewood or thin some timber yourself. Gloria did when she was married to Bob and after he got killed, but then the insurance money came through, and she left that kind of work behind.

The sun came up earlier every morning and set later every night. Some days turned hot on the mountain. Most nights stayed warm, even at 6,000 feet, 45 degrees north.

Leland had to start work on his road contracts. I paid him. I worked by myself, finished my first contract, and started my second. I camped where I worked part of the time, but I stayed in town more than I had the summer before.

A sign hangs on the wall in the restaurant that's also a bar. The sign says, "This town is too small to have a town drunk, so we all take turns doing the job." That place is the community center. Everyone goes there to see what's happening in town, even people who don't drink. They go in for breakfast or for coffee, stay there an hour or two, and see most of the local people. I hadn't been in there much in the last few years, but I started having breakfast there when I was in town.

Some mornings, Gloria ate breakfast there or dropped in for coffee, and I usually sat at her table. We talked about the weather and about Forest Service contracts, about who was selling firewood this year and how they were doing at it.

Most mornings, I thinned trees up on the mountain, starting at daylight. I kept the saw roaring, and trees hit the ground, thump, thump, thump. I got the most work done when I camped on the mountain, took two or three hours off through the middle of the day, ate, rested in the shade, took a short nap, read for a while, then started the saw again and dropped trees until dark, slept there on the mountain, and started over again at daylight, made money while the sun shone.

I figured I'd be set up to do whatever struck my fancy come winter. I might take a trip to the city seeking companionship, even companionship to bring home, though the chance of that coming to something meaningful seems to diminish as the years go by.

The world is on a practical bent. A weekend trip to the mountains might appeal to someone, but it takes earth-shaking to interest anyone in changing the way they live.

Becoming a hermit wasn't really what I wanted, so I went to

the bar some nights. The bar was safer, maybe, since they buried Bob deep in the mountain ground. Terry drank a few beers there some nights and was volatile, as was Ron Cigliani and his son, Ron Cigliani, old enough by then to drink in a bar legally, and Rick, but none of them were quite as unpredictable as Bob used to be.

If a person knew all the history and all the rules, saw all claimed females as vague outlines to look through and beyond, didn't say anything that could be taken wrong, and didn't get lost in the dim light and step on somebody's foot, he was relatively safe.

I went in early in the evening, drank coffee or a soft drink, and found out what people talked about. I talked to Gloria. I said, "How are Steve and Tina doing?"

She said, "Fine. They're doing fine."

She moved her drink around in small circles on the wooden surface of the bar. She studied the wet patterns the condensation on her glass made. Then she rubbed her fingers back and forth through the moisture, stretching it out on the varnished wood.

I said, "So what's ahead for you this winter?"

"Winter? How would I know about winter? Summer just got here." She ordered another drink.

I thought she might be drunker than usual, so I disappeared into the outside moonlit, starlit night. Some nights in the bar worked out okay, and some didn't

I walked down the mountain beside the highway. I wondered what I was looking for. I wondered how much I'd changed in the two years since Anna said, "No more of this quiet mountain town for me. I'm moving back to the city. If you want anything further from me, you go with me to the city," which I had, before, and I knew I couldn't, again.

I couldn't live in the city. I needed a mountain under my feet. I needed pine duff and mountain soil beneath my feet. I needed mountain breezes, blowing fresh off pine, fir, aspen, and western larch trees, blowing fresh off snow lingering in north slope. I needed quiet mountain nights when I heard owls call, when I heard coyotes sing to each other, when I heard stars carry on bright, shining conversations deep in the clear sky. I loved Anna with intensity that grew clear down into my roots, but I let that beautiful, brown-haired woman walk away from me because I couldn't do anything else. I couldn't live in the city.

I thought Gloria did have false teeth, like Leland said. They were too white and straight, and I thought I heard them click once when she said "Forest Service contract."

In hot sunlight shining into the mountain valley, shining on

the people in the valley, I saw dark roots under her bouffant blonde hair. Surface appearances didn't matter much to me. Some of the phoniest people I ever met were whole wheat and honey to all external appearances but artificial chemicals at the core.

After a week by myself far up the mountain, I stopped by the bar, still looking, still hoping. In the dim light in the bar's interior, after intense high-elevation sunlight, Gloria, sitting at the bar, looked like a dark shadow.

I didn't know Gloria had had a hell of an afternoon. As the sun fell just over halfway down the western sky, Steve skidded his bicycle in a turn on gravel, lost it, and flew over the handlebars full speed into a tree, broke his arm, abraded his face, and knocked out three teeth.

Gloria's pickup, that had been deteriorating for years, when Bob was its principal driver, wouldn't start. Gloria's neighbor, Sparky, retired elk hunting guide and evergreen seed buyer, called an ambulance and convinced Gloria to keep Steve, who was convinced he was dying, down and quiet until the ambulance arrived. Gloria didn't go with him in the ambulance, because Tina was due home from a friend's shortly. Gloria would get the pickup started, gather Tina, and drive down.

Shortly after the ambulance left, Terry drove into the driveway in his big four wheel drive pickup, climbed down, three fourths drunk, staggered to the front door, knocked, and when Gloria opened the door, grabbed her, convinced she had been pining for his sexual attention since long before Bob died. He was ready to give all of it to her.

She shoved him backward, kicked him in the crotch as he struggled for balance, then grabbed a two by four off the front porch, hit him above his left ear, and split his head open. He fell off the porch into her front yard and bled profusely on her unmowed grass. The ambulance coming up for Terry passed the ambulance going down with Steve.

When things settled down enough that Gloria knew Steve was going to be all right and Terry was probably going to live, she cared about Terry because she thought if he died, she might face a murder charge, Tina arrived home, and Gloria drove down the mountain and checked out things at the hospital, agreed to leave Steve there overnight, then drove back up the mountain, left Tina with her regular babysitter, gathered everything together for another trip to the hospital, but took enough time off to go to the bar, have a drink, and try to ease up a little.

When Gloria got to the bar, Rick was there, with a few under his belt. Apparently he sensed something, as dogs will

pick up an odor from a much-attacked dog and attack it, and he moved in on Gloria with suggestions, but short of physically. She told him to back off and maintain his distance, or there would be a third ambulance coming up the mountain.

Rick left.

I came in the door and saw Gloria sitting at the bar. When my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I thought she looked abject, and it was both by way of commiseration and to get her attention so I could ask her what she was drinking and buy her one that I laid my hand on her shoulder.

She spun around faster than I could think, slammed her left fist into my stomach, followed with a right uppercut that skidded up my jaw and across my eye, then a left to my left cheek that knocked me into the wall and down, sitting on the floor, amazed. The blow to the stomach got my attention. I saw stars when Gloria's right fist smashed into my jawbone and skidded up my face. When she slammed her left fist into my cheekbone, I saw light as bright as summer sun. I fell away from her, and the back of my head hit the hard wooden wall. I saw light as bright as the sun in nova, and in that instant, I understood everything, everything I had ever wanted to understand.

I couldn't look into light that bright, and I blacked out. I slid down the wall and sat leaning against it.

When I opened my eyes again, Gloria hunkered in front of me and reached to touch the damage she'd done to my face. "Oh shit," she said, "I thought you were somebody else."

"So did I," I said. "That's what I thought, too."