

## THROUGH THE ROCKIES

Last night I dreamt I was in the heart of the Rockies, on the Canadian side. I was naked but not cold, which is surprising given the glacial nature of the setting. I like my Rockies rugged, with a low treeline and mantled skree; south of the border they begin to dawdle in the sun, become softer, rounder, more like morass, far less exciting.

In the dream I strain to hear an echo, words come back muddled over top of each other. What is it we dream about? To make love and babies? We've done that. To put thousands of miles of ribbons in our hair and dance in the rain? We've done that. What is it we do not know? Misery. Despair. Laughter. Grace. Maybe our Grace is that we know nothing over and over again.

I write this on the eve of my thirtieth wedding anniversary. I am getting presbyopia, old eyes, if I want to see the wrinkles on my face I need glasses; soon there will be too many to bother. My body shifts with each passing year. I wear high heels less and walk more. My husband insists I am still sexy and somehow that reassures.

Perhaps I am Baudelaire's middle-aged woman, the woman he made up out of practically nothing at all, and turned into a legend for his own amusement. *Are you sure that your story is the real one? But what does it matter what reality is outside myself, so long as it has helped me to live, to feel that I am, and what I am?*

Here's the thing: the people of my family come from the prairies and the coast, farmers and fishers; we are not mountain people. When prairie people fall for coastal people there is only one way to consummate such disparate love, it involves going through the Rockies and learning how to use an emergency brake (something completely unnecessary on flat land). Most importantly it is knowing the art of the traverse. Generation after generation the lovers of my historical bloodline have gone over, across, and right through the Rockies to be together. A mountain range as omnipotent as the Rockies makes for a grand symbol of ardour and a test of love's true character. Mountains, say romantics, are made to be seen over.

Hanging over the TransCanada highway in Alberta's Kananaskis Country is a barren monolithic rock peak called the Fable-Gap Traverse. A geological traverse is a recess formed over time, time measured by years in the billions. It starts as a gentle cascading waterfall weeping its way down a rock face eventually freezing into a solid veil of ice expanding just enough to crack her open, first a little wrinkle, a skree, then another, and another and soon her face is a solid glacier so burrowed it splits her into a two-faced billion-year-old crone, admired by mountaineers for her venerable beauty and respected for her utility.

The summit of the Fable-Gap high-level traverse, viewed easily from the mouth of Heart Creek, is so dangerously steep no form of life, human, plant, or animal is able to take root. Jagged daggers of black ice at the top of the rock face look ready

to dislodge at the slightest provocation—a giant Popsicle speckled with freezer burn a Brobdingnagian tongue could painfully lick.

The fable that gives Fable-Gap its name is feeble. It's about nineteenth century men and their fear of bush. It goes like this: One guy told the other guys she was impossible to summit because there was too much bush at the base. The other guys saw a challenge and set out to prove their virility. They whacked through the bush to climb the summit and then swaggered back to the pub, drank beer in stoneware steins with pewter thumb levers, and laughed and laughed about how easy she was and how none of them harboured even the slightest fear of bush. They named her Fable-Gap, a great name yes, but an embarrassing let down of a fable. Fables should have mythical anthropomorphized creatures, or at the very least, end with a moral in a pithy maxim.

Like this:

Summer at the tail end of the sixties and she looks like a movie star in her Valentino-inspired scarf bought at The Hudson's Bay on Portage and Main and hand-sewn pedal pushers like Liz on the cover of Photoplay. He is devastatingly handsome at the wheel, needs but one hand to drive and in the other, held taut between his index and middle finger, a filtered duMaurier, its familiar red and silver package on the dash. These movie stars are my parents and we are a perfect family in a pristine two-toned blue Chevy that belonged to my grandfather until he died on a golf course in Winnipeg and willed it to my mother. I am in the back seat, on the lookout for a sign, my brother and sister are curled up on the warm belly of our black lab, dozing in and out of sleep, lulled by the motion of the motorcar.

At a bend in the highway I spot the sign—"Entering Kananaskis Country." I am spilling over with anticipation, I catch sight of the sign and my siblings are violently woken up, shaken into consciousness.

"You guys... wake up wake up... I see it—I can see the sign."

I lead the three of us together in perfect harmony to slowly, phonetically, sound out the sign—

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I lean forward to the front seat, and ask the question: Can An Ass Kiss?

Mother, luminous Hollywood actress she is, never disappoints. A slight glance in the rearview mirror at her adoring fans and she coos, "I don't know" in a plummy tone, distinctly un-motherlike. "Let's find out."

She shimmies across the front seat closer than close to Dad, reaches over and lifts his cigarette, puts it in her mouth and takes a deep lascivious drag, holds onto it for eternity and finally exhales, blowing smoke rings over his head.

Dad is a rogue. He takes his bottomless brown eyes off the road and gives her the longest, most dangerous kiss the TransCanada has ever known—smack on her lips. When he is done with her, he takes the cigarette with its glistening wet ring of her ruby red lipstick on its tip, rests it in the corner of his mouth, and leaves it there, smoldering.

We could almost die.

An Ass *Can Kiss!* An Ass *Can Kiss!* Our refrain is transcendent and we collapse, a puddle of glee on the floorboards of Granddad's Chevy.

I see the turn toward Banff and know when we no longer see the Kananaskis Country sign Fable-Gap will fade to mirage, the game will end and with it the freedom to say the word ass and feel the frisson of kissing and driving. *Not by wrath but by laughter do we kill. Come, let us kill the spirit of gravity!*

The Rockies are not a metaphor for my life; if I tried such literary foolhardiness I would be buried alive like those people in the Hope landslide I still worry about. This puzzles me, I know nothing about those people, nothing about their lives. I only know how they died and their death riveted me. Imagine the side of a mountain suddenly coming down on top of you. My father says they were warned—the slightest sound, a car radio with the bass turned up, a cigarette lighter tapping, a child's laughter in the back seat, all these seemingly innocuous sounds evidently have enough vibrato to topple a whole fucking mountain over. These people, a mom and dad and a child or two, ignored the warnings and ended up a sign on the highway adorned with wilted flowers.

If I try to tell it true it sounds a lot like fiction. I have never been buried alive by a mountain, yet I know the unbearable horror that grips a ten year old standing on the knife edge of time overlooking a fallen mountainside wondering which rock the dead people are under and how long they were alive.

The image haunted me during my childhood, but I put it out of my mind. Or so I thought. Throughout my life the Hope Landslide and its buried strangers would reappear—curling into whatever I was thinking. As I got older, I realized it was an echo of something other than what the words on the highway sign actually described—it was an echo of some existential fear of being buried alive in a world that warned me to pay heed.

A month before my twenty-first birthday, I will drive through the Rockies with a nameless RCMP officer and prepare to identify the body of my husband. We will speculate, based on the tire tracks left behind, it was a swerve to miss wildlife, probably a bewildered fawn, followed by lost control of a wheel and ending in a fatal dive over a cliff. Over the police radio I will hear—he was Bambied—and the officer's deft response—I'm with widow. "Bambied," I say out loud and it sounds sweet, like an allegro. "Bambi is an ambitransitive ergative verb," I tell the officer. Widow is an abstract noun.

Only days earlier I was a newly wedded wife, desperately in love and driving on the long and winding TransCanada in the same purple MGB Roadster now at the bottom of a rocky cliff. When we spotted a herd of deer, we parked on the shoulder off the highway to photograph the youngest of the fawns, two baby bucks with doe-spittled fine-haired antlers seeking their wobbly independence across the field; and we swooned.

I have never forgiven the Rockies for this transgression.

Time will heal, that's what the benevolent people say to young widows. And for a time, in case they were right, I fought like hell to prove them wrong. Shivering last words spoken to me from a pay phone moments before death became my mantra, repeated over and over in my dreams. Today the words, like the faded tire

tracks, are gone, not even an echo remains. The benevolent were right: First the Rockies took him, then Time.

Are mountains made to be seen over? Make tangled love all afternoon in a canoe and in denouement comes this kind of rhetorical profundity. It will float alongside a stern facing spine, a leg dangling off the bow, toes au courant, and the absolute certainty of shrouded giants in the mist. Skinny dip under the northern lights swaddled in a fetid tent on a bed of pine cones, beside a pronged poplar root and sleeping baby, smelling of grilled trout and camp soot and folded moonlight. When a man whispers you are as radiant as the iridescent glacier on the mountaintop outside there is no choice but to confess everything.

Traversing the truth is how to stay alive. The truth is nobody knows why the mountain came down. Some say it was an earthquake, but no earthquake is recorded. The truth is my father wanted a mile or two of peace and quiet, no children squirming, arguing or kicking each other in the backseat. He made it up and it became legend. He said the slightest noise, especially noise like children misbehaving in the back seat could cause a mountain to crash down and bury them alive. We didn't believe him so he gave us proof—we only had to look out the window, up at the sprawling rock face of the mountain precariously above our heads, down at the bottomless cliff on the other side of the concrete safety blocks, put our fingertips on our throats go ahhhh. Feel that vibration? One misbehaving child's voice could indeed dislodge the single rock that happens to be holding the whole damn mountain up. Even now, this very moment, as I tell you this story, I do not laugh boisterously lest I fall a mountain. *One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature.*

The last time my mother drove through the Rockies she was seventy-four. We drove together in the heat of the summer in a rental car with broken air conditioning, all four windows wound down so she could smoke. She spent her last two decades alone, claiming she loved solitude and did not miss being married. (Dad remarried.) At Fable-Gap we laugh at the memory of the kissing game. She tells me it was lust. She married him because she confused love with lust. She takes a long drag of her generic brand cigarette from a package covered in warnings of death and photos of hideous teeth and holes in throats, and she exhales. The smoke twists and curls its way up the side of the door to escape through the windows at the top. I owe my existence to lust. *Love forgives the lover even his lust.*

When mother turned seventy-eight I drove all night through the Rockies to surprise her with a visit. We hugged and laughed and ate food that was not appropriate for diabetes. She was proud, after smoking several packs a day for sixty years, she kicked the habit. A month later she caught the flu. An ambulance took her to Edmonton General where after saying goodbye to her friends, holding a bedside peace summit with family, and a long discussion of opera with her cardiologist, she died. During the week before, knowing she was about to die, she asked me to keep it light. We listened to Brigadoon and "Why Must I Die" from Jesus Christ Superstar. I read Earle Birney aloud in the evening lingering over the erotic passages of mountains with sprawling shoulders, men with coltish muscles and pungent moss smells mixed with gentian and saxifrage. Her last advice to me

was, “Don’t be sorry.”

In the spring, after months and months of snow, cascading wildflowers transform the mountains—scarlet fairy trumpets, mouse-ear chickweed, evening primrose, fireweed, shooting stars—I close my eyes and they come in the darkness, wafting, capriccio, blisses. When I married the second time I was prepared. Life and happiness I knew to be impermanent, so every day had to be savoured, I devoured his love, his body, his gaze, him. The sound of a siren no matter how distant—somebody somewhere losing someone—tightened my grip. When love is vulnerable it asserts nakedness as armour.

My last drive through the Rockies was at the wheel of a precocious curve-hugging rear-wheel-driving middle-age-crisis Lexus effortlessly traversing the switchbacks. Moving from Vancouver to San Francisco necessitated taking a detour through the Rockies. Mother’s ashes long forgotten in a box on a bookshelf needed to stay in Canada. I could not bear the thought of crossing the border to have Homeland Security open her up for examination or worse, pat her down, nor did I see myself as the kind of dotty middle-aged woman who carries her dead mother around in her pocketbook—so through the Rockies it was, to scatter mother at the mouth of Heart Creek under the Fable-Gap Traverse where she mistook love and lust and kissed an ass.

In San Francisco I go to Grace Cathedral to hear virtuoso saxophonist Branford Marsalis playing solo. Grace Cathedral sits atop Nob Hill in San Francisco, grand and Episcopal, an urban traverse with a seven-second echo. It is a helluva performance. I feel light, unaware of myself sitting in the pews as his saxophone climbs higher and higher, high enough to stroll along the cathedral catwalk and dream. Each note makes its entrance bouncing off the stone walls leading the stained-glass saints by the hand to dance up the mahogany pulpit and back down again; Marsalis at once solo and an entire orchestra of his own making, a cascade, no, a torrent, of notes fill the air. He is beating. Kneeling. Echoing. Coiling. Curling. Smouldering. It is a conspiracy, us breathing together; he is Pan, and his wailing lament takes me up and down hills, through crooked streets, right to the steely edge of Golden Gate.

Jazz music, like a mountain echo, calls and responds. Mid-performance an ambulance siren wails outside the doors of the cathedral and Marsalis responds, mimicking its tone, its cadence, its pitch. As he rides alongside he lifts the sound up and twists it into whimsy, inhaling suffering and exhaling music.

Walking home after the performance a siren wails in the distance—a sound that gripped me for years turns in a single moment from apprehension to awe. Such is the art of traverse, what we take with us, what we leave behind, the point of departure as fragile as a dissonant note of music or a child’s laugh and can bring a whole lifetime down.

*A Note on the Quotations*

Through most of the '60s and well into the '70s, my father was enamoured with Nietzsche. On family road trips he carried a tattered paperback full of pencil marks and underlines and red stars (highlighters and post-its had yet to be invented). When the scenery overcame him he would drag us out of the car and dramatically read a quote, something apropos. Writing "Through the Rockies," I drew on my memory of these quotes and then used *The Portable Nietzsche* (Penguin Books, 1st ed., 1977, translated by Walter Kaufmann) to ensure my memory was a close approximation to actual Nietzsche (it was).

The woman Charles Baudelaire made up from nothing at all is found in the poem "Windows" from *Paris Spleen* (originally published in 1869, New Directions Paperback Edition, 1970, translated by Louise Varese).