



I.

When you live in a valley that runs along a north-south axis, the beginning and end of things take on a certain symmetry. At dawn, the sun rises behind the eastern range, casting a sharp silhouette of burning light on to the western ridge. At dusk, the eastern peaks are suddenly lit with the stark outline of the western summits. As the Oracle says, you know that you live in a valley only when standing in shadow.

The two ranges trade images of each other most visibly on brilliant winter days, when the snow and the sharpness of light conspire for ideal projection. It was in the very middle of just such a December day that Sue appeared at my door. She was the town's Code Enforcement Officer, and had come to inspect my house, on the western edge of town, before allowing some walls to be knocked down. Sue was gentle in demeanor, solid in stature and her respect for the rule of law was leavened only by her respect for neighborly consideration. She was an Enforcer of Common Sense, and had the kind of thick oversized plastic glasses that only a rural code enforcement officer could wear without either a whiff of irony or a twinge of tragedy. Sue carried herself with dignity.

In her early years on the job, as Sue walked through houses, room by room and floor by floor, the owners would follow and talk. The styles of monologue varied, from urgent chatter to lanky tales, unfolding in lengths like a collapsible yardstick. They talked to ward off the taint of criminality that accompanies even the most innocent inspection. They talked because they had something to hide, even if they had no idea what that thing might be. In the process, of course, they gave all kinds of information away. Most of it was junk, and this suited Sue just fine – an irrelevant talk radio backdrop to her focused inspection. Occasionally, though, more valuable transmissions came through: scraps of fact and bits of story from the increasingly interconnected lore of the town.

Sometimes, at the end of her inspections, people showed her photographs. Sue was so near-sighted that she didn't remove her weighty frames to look at even the tiniest image. She simply held it at arm's length and adjusted the focal length through contractions of her elbow – the way stereographic views were adjusted forward and back along a rail to achieve the proper illusion of depth in the viewing device.

The more Sue learned, the more she talked; the more she talked, the less she wrote things down. By the time Sue arrived at my house, she had crossed over fully from data collector to storyteller. The mountains were visible from every house in the valley, and Sue's particular fascination – one secretly shared by the whole town – was the story of the abandoned upland settlements. As I followed her around my house, fearing the immanent eruption of some unknown scandal of substandard construction, I gladly fell under the spell of her narrative.

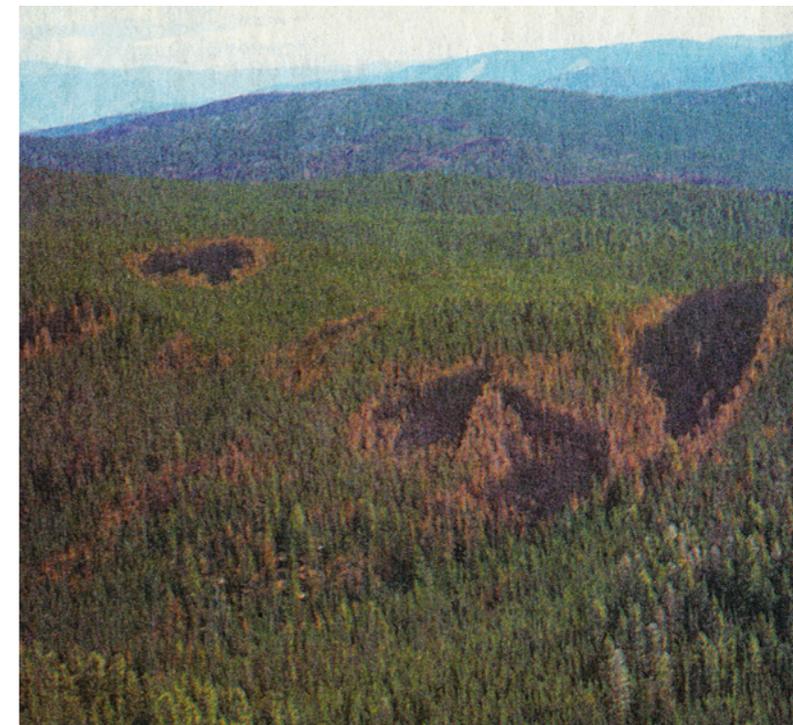
Comfort Peak, above the east side of the town, and Forge Mountain, atop the western flank of the valley, were settled around the mines. These were company towns – one on each ridge – carved out against clear-cut slopes and strung together by steep mountain roads and complex intermarriages. After the First World War, the markets slumped and production slowed. Eventually the company went bankrupt, ceding the land to the federal government and leaving the mining families behind in their houses. Years later, the government bought the remaining residents out of their homes, razed the town, and resettled everyone in the surrounding lowlands. The barren slopes were reforested and converted into wilderness land. All that remained of the settlements were isolated foundations, roads converted into hiking trails, and a few abandoned cemeteries. Seventy years later, the hills are uninhabited.

Sue had begun to share her research with a guy named Wade, who lived on the far side of the valley from me, all the way east, where the sun sets an hour later. Sue was adept at organizing and cataloguing facts, but Wade was the culler and keeper of photographs. He was descended from mining families, and pictures are the kinds of things people prefer to share with kin. So when I asked Sue if there were photographs from the old settlements, she said: you would have to speak to Wade.

II.

Wade's house is the only habitable structure at the spot where Ridge Road drops down to meet School Road in a sudden tee. It's a low-slung split-level home set among two crumpled wooden chicken houses, a massive dark barn and a couple of small, indefinite outbuildings. Wade emerged out of some tall brush at the edge of a manicured lawn as I pulled into the driveway. He carried a big empty bucket that looked delicate in his enormous hands. Inside, after a twilight tour of his fossil and brick collections, Wade seemed a bit too large for the low-ceilinged kitchen he led me through en route to the living room.

He called it, with a wink, the Board Room, and it was indeed dominated by an enormous dry-erase board, about 14 feet long and four feet tall. Set atop three folding tables, and propped against the mantelpiece, the board nearly touched the ceiling. On it, Wade and Sue had mapped out the entire genealogy of the mountain towns. Every known member of each recorded family was listed in neat columns, decorated with a serpentine of bright orange lines indicating marriages. This genealogy, and the folkloric saga that unfurled around it, painted Forge Mountain and Comfort Peak as one continuous world. The two upland settlements seemed inseparable, linked by families and traditions, as if the two mines met in a deep subterranean passageway. The mountain people were like flying squirrels gliding over the inconsequential valley floor; dust-bowl brigands, signaling back and forth across the shadowy chasm.



On the largest Formica tabletop I have ever seen, among the mounds and spreads of notes and letters and other informational flotsam, were two enormous binders, tabbed with the surnames of all the families. Some names were mundane: Smith and Powers and O'Brien. Many offered a frankly materialist directness: House and Bucket, Longhouse and Bastion; Messenger, Bacon and Fish. Finally, there was a flurry of wondrously conditional families, blurred into uncertainty from their very inceptions: Parshall, Slighter, Mabee and Mabbie. These were the faces I wanted to see.

Wade waved me to a seat, forged a clearing on the table, and set the first binder in front of me. I opened it, and there they were: newlyweds, sixth grade classes, family gatherings, schoolyard hijinks, snowy landscapes and summery idylls. Clapboard houses with back porches, smart little schoolhouses with pastured horses. A catalogue of facades, back yards and front parlors. There was no dignified squalor or hard-bitten deprivation. No mud and pride and resignation. I saw no malnourished children of careworn mothers, whose windswept faces stared into uncertain futures. I looked through the entirety of both albums, but not a soul even looked tired. As the Oracle says, the peaks had been purged only of happiness.

III.

A few mornings after her first visit, Sue stopped by my house again. There were a few things she had overlooked or forgotten; stuff she had not written down. I said: you were telling me too many stories. She sheepishly agreed. And in an uncharacteristic moment of neighborly self-regard, I said: next time you go out on inspections, I will come along and take pictures for you, for reference. She laughed awkwardly and declined. I persisted, asking what she was doing the rest of the day. She answered – reluctantly, and because she wasn't much for lying – that she had a few inspections. This was my chance. I said: I'm free right now. I'll come with you, as your assistant. She didn't know what to do. She accepted the offer. I grabbed my camera and followed in my own car, giving Sue her due distance.

As we went from house to house that day, I photographed whatever Sue looked at – a camera flash of light punctuating each observation. Usually she would nod towards the offending object or area, or, most helpfully, and sometimes with my prodding, point to it with her gently crimped index finger. Sue obviously didn't enjoy the awkwardness of my presence and the invasiveness of the camera. It undermined her private rapport with the homeowners, and she was more reticent than usual. Still, Sue told a few stories, and I listened while I shot, drunk on the conjoined pleasures of inclusion and distance. I knew, already, that this would never happen again.

Sue described a spot, far from the remaining road on Comfort Peak, where the mine manager's house once stood. The federal government had razed the structure, but left the wisteria vines, which had been trained up through the porch columns, to run wild. Every spring, in the deep obscurity of the forest, this giant undomesticated vine erupts in a baroque mass of violet flowers twining among the treetops. As the Oracle says, there is always wisteria in the woods.



IV.

Sue sits at her computer, between the wood stove and the upright piano, in that great dark room at the back of her house. Her dial-up connection churns heroically, like an old mill-ox, painstakingly unveiling each picture, a quarter inch at a time. She leans in towards the screen, her mouth agape, the slowly alternating ratio of luminance to shadow playing across her bespectacled face. The scene seems to last forever – a caravaggesque rendering of some minor myth, in which the horror and splendor of her astonished visage, lit by a primitive forge, supersedes the particulars of the obscure narrative.

Late at night, there is an email reply from Sue. The subject line is blank. I open it. The message is three words long, in all caps, in royal blue.

OH I NO.

I scroll down but there is nothing else. I read it over and over again, speaking it under my breath. The syntax of these three words seems impenetrable. Oh I no. The utterance suggests resignation. Then it sounds like sarcasm and rebuke. Finally, the phrase settles into a dark incantation: an assertion, a curse and an accusation. It is a chant in a mysterious ritual. Urgent breathy sounds to summon unknown forces.

OH I NO. OH I NO. OH I NO.



Outside, in the sharp December night, cold air catches in the lungs like a sudden affliction. The town, held in the valley, is extinguished completely. But the snow-dusted peaks throb into presence, shadowy bitmaps of low-res grandeur, gathering faint light from unknown sources. Orion is laid out in unnatural clarity above the eastern ridge. Just below, not in the sky but on the mountaintop, is an unexpected glimmer. This light quavers and moves, as if held aloft by a desperate fugitive, or a mad hunter giving chase. The unsteady beam warbles briefly along the ridge, moving south through haphazard wilderness, and disappears.

In the restored stillness, Comfort Peak and Forge Mountain hum solemnly, the tones meeting in a minor discord that descends to resonate along the valley floor. As the Oracle says, these lowlands hold no harmony.



V.

1. Raw harrowing confusion. What seems to be the over-bright arch of an arm ending in a partially severed hand. Behind that, the back of a cave, or perhaps a basement: alternating dark masses that resolve only into obscurity.
2. The upper half of a framed poster. Above it, a grey wall joins an equally grey ceiling. The left side of a face appears in the right foreground, radically unfocussed, light blocking the eye and revealing only the jagged line between brown bangs and white forehead.
3. From above, the back of a figure, dropping into a murky stairwell, as if reeling downward after a sharp blow. In the foreground, on the wall, black scuffmarks indicate a struggle.
4. A suddenly turned back, caught in the glare of illumination. Behind and to the left, in profile, one arm outstretched in zombie somnolence, the figure moves across spectral darkness.
5. The corner of a wooden dresser. Motes of dust caught up in the sudden light. Behind that, a soiled-looking bed and a crouching figure, signaling urgently toward the floor.
6. A jaw and a mouth – set neutrally, with a gentle downward frown. Above the nose, the twin orbs of giant glasses concentrate all the obliterating light of a horrible flash. Around them, nothing.
7. A curved pipe drops into the center of the frame, so lit as to suggest electrification. It is met and gripped, erotically, between thumb and forefinger.
8. A blurred forearm ending in a small hand, curled almost into a fist. Behind it, sharp but in shadow, a jagged dark hole in a white wall, revealing sinews of wood and metal.

NO SUCH PLACE

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