

Read Boggs'

SPiRochee

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HAS IT IN FOR ME

For half an hour she crouched, tolerably dry, on a mottled rock only an inch or two above the recurrent lift of cold sea turbulence flooding in, wave after wave of it, at the Pacific's quieting edge. This was low tide at Shell beach, near the mouth of the Russian river. Parts of the beach were uncovered that were under water when we saw it earlier that day. There are many wave-hammered rocks at this beach, and only a narrow, sharply tilted shelf of sand. The sun was setting, a spot of red and pink in the evening haze, and the sea was silver and silver grey. The water was very rough, and great combers were crashing against the rocks offshore.

She observed the sea life in a tide pool as each clamoring billow swept around the rock and gushed into the stony hollow at her feet. The green algae in the turbulent water darkened like a stormy sky as each wave came in. "Ancestors! Siblings!" she hailed them, remembering that four billion years ago we humans were born as algae in the warm waters of the primordial ocean. She saw flowerlike sea anenomes, warted and tendrilled, half buried in the sand, that changed shape ceaselessly in the swash of the Pacific, and sea slugs fastened to the rocks, and dark grey periwinkles, less than half an inch long, in irregular clusters. Surf grass, with dense leaves like little swords, floated in the rocky pool that brimmed and drained as each billow came and went.

I stood nearby and watched the waves crash on the outer rocks, shooting spray into the air and filling the shoreline with a turmoil of white water. Gulls sailed overhead as if exulting in the surging waves and explosions of breaking surf. Then she arose and gave her place to me. I hunkered on the self-same rock to watch the sea anenomes open and close in the tide pool. The very first wave that came in drenched my shoes with brine and oozy seaweed and pale sea foam.

THE SLUMMY PART OF TOWN

The Snickers bar got too warm in my pocket and smudges my fingers with chocolate when I eat it. I park, and fumble in my pocket for a Kleenex, smearing a gob of candy on my Carhartt jacket. The wild grass in the slummy part of town is never cut and cascades in a green wave over the curb into the street. A little line of grass and weeds zigzags along a crack in the pavement almost to the center of the street. Whitman said the grass grows alike among black folks as among white, but it grows more lushly down here in the slummy part of town where the blacks live. My tooth begins to throb from the candy bar. There's an ancient Chevy with tail fins propped up on cinder blocks just ahead of me along the street. I see it through the VW's dusty windshield and it stares back at me with goggly ruby eyes slightly askew. There's always an old car up on cinder blocks somewhere along these mean streets. It has probably been rusting there, its back wheels removed and taken away -- someplace -- since 1979 or thereabouts, and will remain there years longer till enough money is made, or stolen, to fix whatever is wrong. I lick off the sticky chocolate and spot the candy on my jacket with a wet finger. My shabby jacket, tattered at the cuffs, looks like it has served me four or five winters (it has). Elsewhere on the street a couple of grease-soiled men are bent prone over the fenders into the

motor of another old car. The hood is up, and a visitor from Arcturus would suppose they were caught in the jaws of a metal monster. A gnarly old black man wearing a cowboy hat shambles past, leading a spotted dog on a length of clothesline. Other black men, more indolent, lounging at ease in the sunshine, are sprinkled here and there on the front porches and front steps of the tumbledown houses lining the street. Blacks are more sociable than whites, and shout to one another things I can't make out but sound amiably insulting. Just now, though, they fall silent, and I can almost hear these old houses rotting and settling. A yardful of golden oxalis, leaning toward the sun, is dappling and dipping in a little wind, looking as beautiful as Wordsworth's daffodils. I'm glad they don't mow the yards in the slummy part of town. A woman parks her car across the street, gets out, and walks slowly in the direction of the main drag. From her short skirt, lavender pantyhose, and high heels I suppose she's a hooker on her way to work. Her car is about three thousand dollars newer than mine. Discarded beer cans glitter amid the dead leaves and trash littering the edges of the street. They don't clean the streets often in the slummy part of town. The last time must have been during the presidency of William Howard Taft. A yellowing newspaper floats lazily in a small updraft, probably as outdated as the one in Heinlein's "Our Fair City." My tooth still hurts, and my glasses are dirty. Then there's my hair, which is falling shaggily down over my ears, and a vague arthritic stiffness in my right forefinger. But I sniff the perfume of coffee in the air, and of blooming lilacs. I can't tell where either scent is coming from. I toss my candy wrapper into the heaps of refuse in the gutter, start up my car, and depart.

TAPING MY TYPING

The other day I recorded the sound of my typing to see how fast I seemed to be going. Perhaps my typing has been heard on tape on some previous occasions as an incidental accompaniment to some other activity, but this time I set up Gretchen's little Radio Shack CTR-33, her original cassette recorder which she later called her "field equipment," and had the condenser mike listen specifically to my typing.

When you are actually pounding away at the keyboard, it is hard to tell just how fast you sound. I always wondered how much I resembled a professional typist, one of the women you see clicking effortlessly along on a Selectric III when you walk through a busy business office. The only time I could have been considered a professional typist was when I was classified as a clerk-typist in the armed forces during world war 2. In those days I seemed on a par with almost everybody I worked with, but the level of skill probably wasn't very high. I never worked as a typist in the same office with WACs, and not many men in those days could type at all, even badly. I was one of the few. Another exception was the Cubano I knew at Alamogordo air base in 1943. He had just learned to type at an army school in Colorado Springs and could already type 120 words a minute in English, 130 in Spanish. When he typed he turned himself into an unthinking machine, and I could never do that.

Some people have thought I was a good typist, however. Mrs Solt, our amiable landlady when we lived at 2132-A Prince street, used to say, "Oh you type so fast, Mr Schwenn!" (She called me Mr Schwenn because Gretchen and I weren't married as

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yet, and we were reluctant to admit the fact to her. That was another era. Ever a fervent feminist Gretchen didn't want to be called Mrs Boggs; hence I became Mr Schwenn. Mrs Solt called me that for years after she knew the truth.) Of course she was no expert about typing. But Gretchen was, and when I used to complain about my lack of manual dexterity, Gretchen would scoff, "Don't give me that! Look at how fast you type!" And Marion Z. Bradley once told me that I am the second-best typist she knows. I've conveniently forgotten who the best is (probably her son) because one hates to have his egoboo diluted, even when it is not deserved. Of course she didn't say I was the second-fastest.

When I recorded the sound of my typing the other day I was using the IBM Model C that Dave Rike sold me for a modest sum. I didn't start using electric typewriters till about six years ago. (Slowly I progress into the twentieth century, but I won't start using word processors till well into the twenty-first. God knows what sort of contraption everybody else will be using, then.) Once or twice I switched back to my old Hermes manual, for some reason, and found it a pleasant experience, like donning slacks and an open-neck shirt after wearing a suit and tie for a day or two. Once I remembered that you've got to reach up and slap back the shift lever at the end of each line I seemed to be able to type as fast on such a machine as on one powered by electricity. Even so, I have gone back to electrics if for no other reason than that they have "repeat" keys for dashes, underlines, and X's.

But how did my typing sound on tape? Well, I discovered that I sound like I am moseying along in the sunshine rather than hurrying -- a typewriter Thoreau rather than a Jesse Owens. The tape read back to me a rather abashed clatter with only modest speed and authority. I touch-type (except for the top line on the keyboard, the one with the numerals and symbols, where I hunt and peck), but that's about the only way in which I resemble a professional typist. I have been typing for 46 years (my god!), but I'm afraid I'll never become a really good typist.

THE KEY

The woman got out of the car at Larkin and California streets in San Francisco and wambled away. She didn't bother to say goodby. She didn't even say thank you, even though I had driven her all the way from Berkeley to the City after picking her up as a hitchhiker. I smiled sadly to myself, drove to the Bay bridge, and came on home. Such ingratitude didn't surprise me.

I had found the woman hitchhiking along University avenue in Berkeley about midnight when I was coming home from a movie. She said she wanted to go down to the freeway entrance, hoping to snag a ride across the bay. I felt sorry for her. She lives in a halfway house in San Francisco, she told me; she is on Thorazine, an anti-psychotic drug; she was dressed in rags. She showed me some leaflets she had picked up from Wells Fargo about obtaining a car loan, and this, more than anything else, made me pity her. I knew that she was even less likely to be lent money from a bank than I am. With misgivings at each concession, I bought her a burger and a milkshake at the Doggie Diner, two packs of cigarets, a bag of potato chips and a Coke. Ultimately, since she was reluctant to thumb a ride at the freeway, I took her over to San Francisco myself.

People are so often ungrateful, but at least this poor woman was deserving of my help. Gretchen and I often helped people who should have been helping us. "How can you be so charitable toward these bastards who've got 50 times our bankroll?" I used to grump to her after we had given a ride home to some professor or affluent graduate student. But she was always generous, even though she felt hurt sometimes when the person scuttled away without thanking us. We drove people all over the Bay area: to the City on several occasions; to Mills College in the south end of

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A loose-living lass in Biloxi
Has a figure with plenty of moxie,
But due to the danger
From spirochetes, stranger,
You'd be wise to approach her by proxy!

-- Eldrin Fzot

Oakland, to darkest Richmond, and many other places. Once I hurried out to rescue a friend from the mental ward of Gladman Memorial hospital in the Fruitvale district. He was so happy to see me that he danced around me when I was allowed to enter the fenced-in ward, but after I had driven him to downtown Berkeley, he jumped out of the car and rushed away without a backward glance.

The professors we sometimes drove home from Dwinelle hall on campus were usually a lot more polite and effusive with thanks than other riders we taxied somewhere. Gretchen would watch these others hurry away and shake her head. "I didn't offer them a ride just to get a word of thanks," she said, "but damn it, why are people so uncivilized?" "Because Berkeley, more than most cities, is full of alienated, isolated souls who are entirely bound up in themselves," I said. "They hardly even see us. We've done them a favor, and they think -- if they think at all -- that we should be grateful for the opportunity. I suppose we ought to think so too.

"As a matter of fact," I added with a flash of insight, "we are uncivilized people ourselves. Look at us, bound up in our two-person universe! We're so involved with one another that the world sometimes becomes unreal and unimportant. We often spend a whole weekend without seeing anybody else, and not even missing them."

This revelation was accentuated and underlined one day when, as we were driving home from the University of California campus, Gretchen pulled something from her pocket. "Look what I found in the Dwinelle hall parking lot," she said. Driving along Shattuck avenue I glanced sideways at the glittering object she held in her hand. It was an old-fashioned key with a large, elaborate head. "I wonder what it unlocks?" she mused. "A wine cellar full of rare and expensive vintages?"

"A beautiful lady's boudoir," I suggested. Gretchen shook her head. "It's for Professor Borah's secret hoard of Aztec gold," she insisted, "or else his collection of ancient Mayan artifacts." "More likely his dungeon where he has incarcerated his colleagues and graduate students who proved too stupid to tolerate," I said. "Or even likelier," I added mystically, "it's the key to the universe. Isn't that what they're looking for at the University? Maybe you've discovered it at last. It unlocks the secrets of time and space, CTLs, lefthanded neutrinos, and a woman's psyche."

After we had speculated a while, calling up one amusing whigmaleery after another, Gretchen asked me to stop at the next intersection. I did so, and opening the car door she leaned out and dropped the key through the grating of a storm drain by the corner. Noting my look of surprise she fetched something else from her pocket. "This is the only key I'm really interested in," she said, holding it up for me to see. It was the latchkey to our own apartment.

Praying: When you can't do anything about a situation you pretend that you can.
