

Mountains and Moments

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There was a moment, a long time ago, when the Earth touched me. I was only 5 years old, but you don't forget that kind of day; regardless of your age. It hadn't begun as my best day ever. In 1962, Spirit Lake was horribly remote (having driven there from Seattle on what we'd now call "back roads"). I was there because my mother had to help dedicate a blah-blah-something-or-other. I didn't really know or care what. She promised "a party" and food I'd like. I kept thinking if we had to drive three hours, we should end up someplace with a roller coaster. Today I'd say I was pretty crabby, and it was an inauspicious beginning. But a five-year-old's fury is helpless when attacked by love at first bite.

From the moment that little black dog leapt from the ground, grabbed my lunch from my hand and scampered away, pausing to look back in happy anticipation of a chase, my real memories began. I recall the heat, the mossy smell of old growth forest, the crispness of the air, the feel of pumice beneath my feet (that looked like rock, but weighted no more than air-blown popcorn); and the sense of utter quiet that surrounded us at Spirit lake. (Well, "utter quiet" is likely a false recollection since I'm sure I was making at least as much noise as the dog as we traversed the bathways around the lake).

I don't recall replacing my stolen lunch, and I'm sure – after meeting that dog – I didn't think even once about roller coasters. But as joyful as my play was, the pinnacle event of the day was when she and I reached the far side of the lake: There I paused momentarily from my dog-inspired antics, and was amazed to see Mount St. Helens' figure looming across Spirit Lake, above the tree tops. The view was magical. The mountain's tip was covered in snow, and as the sun set it appeared to be made entirely of pink icing. Oooh, it was an inviting vision for a little girl on a hot summer's day. I vowed to, one day, climb to that mountain's dessert-covered top.

I had pictures of my Spirit Lake trip (mostly of that dog) that I carried with me as I aged and moved. I pulled them out whenever I needed inspiration. I was in college when St. Helens exploded in 1980. One clear day, when the silicone dust she spewed was blowing towards Spokane, I sat on a hilltop in Portland and cried inconsolably. I wondered if our planet would ever again show me a place that touched my heart as Spirit Lake had, so long before. I vowed to become a forest ranger.

I mourned again, years later, when my photographs (along with most of my other earthly goods) were stolen from my garage. (I'd stupidly marked their box as "My most precious things"). The thieves couldn't resist.

Work, love, family and years intervened. I can scarcely believe it was only this spring when I returned to the base of St. Helens. Some would call it "fate". I was driving north on I-5. Out of gas, I took the exit to Toutle.

Mount St. Helens' magic was still in the air.

Truth be told, that day I was on my way to any remote place where I might walk off into the snow and succumb to hypothermia. I was a suicidal psychotherapist completely unable to help anyone else, since I was most assuredly unable to help myself. I suppose I was feeling sorry for myself. I'd gone all sorts of directions in my life – none of which seemed to turn out well – even though I'd consistently tried to "to the right thing". I was on a sentimental journey because I was feeling at an all-time low. I was saying, "goodbye" to my favorite places.

I expected desolation in this place, but found a beautiful young forest around the base of (a much shorter) Mount St. Helens. Toutle, Washington is thriving where disaster once prevailed. I sipped coffee in a tiny pancake shop and found myself regaling a local resident with my memories. He listened well, all the time smiling. I retold stories I hadn't thought of in years: about the pink frosting, the little black dog, and how I've continued to see Mount St. Helens and Spirit Lake whenever I sing America the Beautiful. He must have been an exceptional listener, because I told him how I'd failed in each of my vows: I never climbed to the peak of Mount St. Helens, and I didn't become a forest ranger. Then, somehow it slipped out. I told him about how I'd repeatedly used the "not-what-I-ordered-but-became-better-than-a-roller-coaster day from my childhood to give hope to countless patients; each of which had come to me for healing. I told him a great deal (I don't really know what got into me). Still he showed no signs of boredom (or exhaustion).

Unexpectedly, he reached beneath the counter and pulled out a small blue cloth. A gold star was stitched unevenly near the center. "Haven't given one o' these in a spell," he chuckled, handing me the cloth, "but this mountain – she's a part of you."

He explained it was a lodge my mother had been there to dedicate in 1962: Camp Loowit. He'd been associated with the camp from 1959 until it was destroyed by St. Helens' blast in 1980, and he told me about the Ragers: Hundreds of campers earned a "rag" as a reward for displaying positive qualities. They came in different colors: Green for friendship; brown for love; Red for humility. Wearing a Blue rag meant you pledged to support the spirit of the camp in everyday life.

I stared at the rag, as if he'd gifted me with diamonds. "And the star. . ." I queried?

"Only an older camper can get that one" he smiled knowingly. "It's gotta be someone with all the qualities o' the others, who can say what her purpose in life really is."

I nearly dropped the rag. I didn't know. . .how could he think I did?

"By the way – her name was Candy" he added.

I stared down at the blue thing with the hand-sewn star. I may have stared a few minutes, but it wasn't all that long. When I looked up, he was gone.

By 7 PM I was home, the blue rag in my purse. "Are there angels" my daughter asked.

"Yes, there are." I said without hesitation.

"Where do they live, Mom. . .Heaven"?

"Sometimes they live close to Heaven; in the mountains" I replied. I thought of that little black dog, the mountain, and the man who gave me the rag, and began to hum America the Beautiful.