

Blast

I flipped the back porch light switch on. Thundering blast stunned my ears and shook our mountain and our house on the mountain. My mother ran from the kitchen onto the back porch and asked, "What was that?"

I said, "What was what?"

I saw Mom's deep concern, and I saw fear in her eyes. I realized my dad's sense of humor, that relied heavily on practical jokes and on the innocent ignorance of the joked upon, might not work for me.

I said, "Everything's all right. Dad dynamited the spring. Everybody's safe. Dad wired the detonator to the light switch and told me when to flip the switch. When I turned it on, that set off the dynamite. We got everyone away before I set it off."

I think my mother would have hit me then, as punishment for not telling her ahead of time, for the fear she had suffered, but she checked her swinging fist because she quickly realized I had been set up by my dad.

I was ten.

Whatever they went through when my mother confronted my dad with his failure to tell her about the explosion ahead of time is written in their history. I wasn't privy to it.

After the blast, I asked for and received assurance from Dad that it was safe to go down the trail and look at the spring.

I walked down the quiet, cool trail. Trees and brush grew both sides of the steep trail. The spring wasn't there anymore. There was only a stark, bare hole in the side of the mountain, exposing red mud, filling now with muddy water.

Small trees that had bent their soft green leaves above the pool of clear water were broken to multiple pieces and thrown away from the water. Grass was gone. Moss was gone. Leaves slowly decomposing to fertile soil beside the spring and in the small pool were gone.

All plants were gone from the center of the spring, where clear water came up from the mountain and forced its way into the gathered muddy water. Mud and fragments of plants spread out around the now-barren spring.

Where was the small green frog who had held tightly to the main trunk of an aspen tree and breathed in and out before the blast? Its wide throat expanded and contracted, vibrated with the passage of air as I breathed and watched the small animal. Shining black and orange eyes looked at me and at the world around us. Spring and summer before the blast, I watched the frog for a long time in sunshine. Then I said, "Goodby for now," picked up my bucket of water and walked up the steep trail toward our house.

After the blast, I had no words. I hadn't visualized this when Dad talked about blasting the spring out. It was just words to me, "Blast the spring out." It would make the water easier to get, he said. I had little idea what "Blast the spring out" meant. Everything it meant tried to come into my mind, now. Cold water pooled in front of me. Meaning of the changes to this place on the mountain tried to come into my mind.

I stood alone in hot sunshine. After the blast, late summer sun shone hot on my back, on my neck, on the back of my head, on the mountain around me. Blasting the spring out meant devastation in front of me, touching me, touching my mind without words. Fragments of words started to form, disappeared into nothingness, unformed questions, hot sunshine, mud.

Something escaped from me, slowly, like the frog's air sack deflating when the frog breathed out. I felt something go out of me. I had no understanding of what had gone from me nor how it had gone from me. Loneliness crept into me and tried to fill my hollow places.

I turned and started back up the steep trail. Dust stirred under my feet. Hot sun shone on me, on the mountain.

We lived in Cedar Flats, on the west side of the Cascade Mountains, up a gravel road a few miles from the McKenzie highway. Three houses, including ours, scattered through forest and meadow on flatter areas before the mountain continued its steep climb toward the sky. Our two-story house had never been finished inside. Upstairs, bare studs stood without drywall closing off the studs, suggesting but not establishing separate rooms.

We had no running water. We children hauled water up the hill from the spring.

Dad was only there some of the time, had jobs in other places and came home when he could or when he would.

We were five children by then. On the same flat area our

house shared with trees, wildflowers, and wild mountain grasses, we built a garden.

Mostly, Mom built the garden. Mom gardened, added vegetables that grew in the garden to our daily provender, canned voluminously from the garden, and stored the resulting sealed jars of food for winter.

Mom added to our food supplies, worked with quiet natural forces, tried to gather her thoughts and her self into a calm center from which she approached her five children, her husband, the pressures of living in the world.

My older brother and my older sister and I pulled weeds from the garden under Mom's close supervision.

Long before dynamite disfigured the mountain, through spring and summer, we hauled a lake of water from the spring up a hundred yards of steep trail to the house and garden.

We carried buckets, or three of us worked together and carried a small galvanized-metal tub nearly full of water.

Stop giggling, because giggling spills water, and nobody wants to spill water we've hauled that far.

We existed in warfare as we grew up, but we formed a truce and worked together well when we hauled water. Working together well made the task pleasant and entertaining. We poured water into a larger tub in the garden, and Mom watered from the tub. We trusted her not to waste water.

Dad was there sometimes the spring and summer we hauled so much water to our garden. He promised several times to "blast the spring out" so water would be easier to get from the spring. He would put an electric pump there, and we wouldn't have to haul water up the hill anymore. I don't think any of us thought much about what he said. We went on doing what we were doing, mainly hauling water up the steep trail from the spring to the garden.

Life dominated the spring. Our part of Cedar Flats provided room for our house, for a dog on a chain that ran along an overhead wire, and then room for a huge garden.

Beyond the garden, the mountain rose again and resumed its full-time business of raising a forest, green and filled with life in multitudinous forms. Unchained, our dog ran down to the spring and back up again and around the garden with five children, or several of five, depending on schedules. Something had to be very important to earn anyone absence when the crew of children carried water.

Cloistered under trees, surrounded by trees, by soft green brush, grasses, moss, flowers, and ferns, our spring pooled clean water in moss and rocks and clay soil for our careful dipping. Five children, from 5 to 13, carried a lot of water.

In the garden, Mom said, "We'll cover this area with burlap sacks, to slow evaporation of water, and we'll keep the sacks damp. In about two weeks, carrots will sprout."

We sprinkled the burlap daily. Secret processes took place in darkness under the burlap. Two weeks after Mom carefully planted tiny carrot seeds, we lifted the burlap and found sprouted carrot tops, yellow from lack of sunlight, but greening rapidly as they grew toward the sun.

Mom lured us to work by showing us the garden demonstrated fascinating processes of life. We raked, planted, weeded, hauled water, hauled water, and hauled water. Dry, seemingly inert seeds, carefully planted, watered and tended, sprouted, reached for sunlight, and grew rapidly into succulently-edible vegetables. Mom didn't talk much about life's processes. She showed us. Each of us fit what we learned into life as we understood it.

If no one outside our family understood the glories of garlic fresh from the ground, that didn't concern us. We five children ate green, growing garlic the way some eat scallions. We started eating garlic as a dare amongst us, but we all liked it once we tried it. Mom had to declare garlic a protected vegetable to get any to cook with.

We needed garlic power, carrot power, lettuce power, the power of freshly-hulled peas, and corn, raw from the cob. All thinnings became food for children, and we ate them in the garden. Mom's friends and relatives had questioned her wisdom when she started such a large garden that far from water, but the growing interest and appetites of her children proved her wisdom.

None of us liked vegetables at the table much, but vegetables so fresh they were dirty, grown from water we carried up the hill, washed in water we hauled up the hill, before we spread that water over other vegetables still growing toward the sun, was food of a different color than vegetables out of a can at the table. Almost everything was good. If one of us didn't like one vegetable, somebody else did.

Carrots grow a long time before they gain any size. We ate radishes, lettuce, spinach, peas, kohlrabi, and strawberries

before we pulled and ate the first small carrots. After I ate carrots just pulled from the soil, I always liked fresh, carefully grown, carrots.

We loved rain that sometimes poured from the generous sky and released us from water-hauling duties to run to other adventures.

After he blasted out the spring, Dad might have gotten around to stringing an electric wire down the hill, the way he promised, and he might have installed a pump to pump water to the garden and to the house the next summer. But he worked construction and followed jobs and other callings and never found time to follow through on his promise to pump water from the spring.

Something happened to each of us when we saw the spring after Dad blasted it. Venita said, "It's muddy. It's mud. There's nothing here but mud, now. Mud."

Gerry dipped water. He knelt in mud and dipped water. He said, "It isn't easier. It's harder. It's mud." Before the blast, plants and decomposing leaves kept the dirt in place, filtered the water before it pooled where we could reach it and dip it from crouching or kneeling on a soft carpet of living plants and plants that had lived their seasons of life and then slowly returned to soil.

After the blast, it became almost impossible to get clean water for the house. Mud stirred into the water with the slightest motion through the water.

We laughed less after the blast, when we carried water up the steep path. Hauling water became less fun, more something that had to be done.

We moved from Cedar Flats that winter.

We took boxes full of jars of food that Mom preserved, hot afternoons in a steamy kitchen. She filled boiled jars with hot tomatoes, corn, beans, beets, and other vegetables and sealed the jars.

Every time we ate food Mom had preserved, there was the garden again, beautiful shades of living colors on the flat below dense green forest rising steeply toward blue sky, and there we were, in my memory, as clear as sunlight and flowing spring water, hauling clean, cold water up the steep trail, learning about the wonder of life in ways that will last all our lives.

and then the blast. Mud. Devastation.

I carried an unresolved, not-understood vision of

devastation, of life destroyed.

I grew up and looked back. The spring and the spring blasted were among memories that came back to me a long time later, as I thought about forces that formed my thoughts, my understanding of myself, my understanding of my family, of the world, of the universe.

Before the blast, trees grew over the spring. Brush, grass, trees, and flowers grew lushly on the side of the mountain. Hidden trails for animals and for children wove through the brush and grass and trees and flowers and past the spring.

I watched yellow jackets add tiny amounts of material, building patiently toward a large nest for their family, community.

A small green frog perched in a tree breathing. Frog and child watched each other and breathed the same mountain air, away from the world. Hornets watched children haul water and went on building their nest, flew close to us but didn't sting, looked at us and then went back to work.

We left Cedar Flats, when I was ten.

When I was ten, I understood little of what I understand now in words, in conscious processes of thought. I don't remember sorting through things and trying to make sense of my life, of life.

Two images, ideas, experiences of the spring existed in my mind, then, when I was ten, leaving our place on the mountain, the spring before the blast, in all its beauty and meaning, and the spring after the blast, a large muddy hole in the side of the mountain that didn't need to be there in ugliness, that, after we had gone, began to reestablish life in greenness, in multiple colors and sounds of life.

Both faded from my consciousness, like dreams fade from consciousness, until well into my adulthood, when I began to realize that much I had not remembered was still in my mind and influenced my direction as I continued into my future and came into my conscious thoughts again when I stirred deeply, seeking to understand more about myself and all of existence.