

## Steel String Guitars and Sweet Oranges

Oak leaves fall in autumn wind and cushion the earth beneath my feet as I walk through afternoon sunshine halfway up the Sierras of Northern California. Tall pine trees and fir trees, aspen trees, manzanita brush, ceonothus brush, forbes, grasses and flowers around me grow toward the sun. Grass on the mountain bleaches autumn yellow.

Mountain quail explode from grass and low bushes in front of me, thunder up the mountain on drumming wings, and drop into the shelter of manzanita brush and meadow grasses.

My heart, startled to a high race by the sudden roar of many wings, settles toward normal as members of the covey call softly to each other to gather together again. Three deer stop to watch me walk in gentle wind. The little-traveled gravel road across the top of the meadow was my goal, but I begin to feel like someone slams high voltage spikes into my knee and shin with a twelve-pound sledgehammer. I lie down on thick accumulation of pine needles under a tall, old growth ponderosa pine tree, put a dead limb under my left knee to keep it bent so it won't lock straight, push my hands deep into my coat pockets, and drift into sleep.

Clouds gather dark above me. I wake. Down the slope from me, two hunters carry rifles across the mountain meadow, cross the gravel county road, and walk into timber growing above the meadow. Thunder rumbles on the mountain. Dusk flies toward me on dark wings. I stand and brush pine needles from my coat.

I want to get home before dark. When the drunk driver hit me, I flew from my motorcycle over his car and landed on my head on asphalt, shattered my helmet and fractured my skull. The fracture severed the nerve to my right ear. In addition to losing my hearing in my right ear, I lost the function of my inner ear, the part of my sense of balance that tells me I'm vertical when I don't have a visual reference. After dark, I stagger and reel like a lonesome drunk. After dark, the heavy manzanita cane Pete gave me doesn't always help. Sometimes I place it wrong, and I overbalance above it. It could catapult me down the hill or head on into a tree.

Tall fir trees and pine trees, oak trees, some madrones grow from steeply-rising ridges both sides of the narrow logging road

bladed into California red clay, grown up with twenty-five years of trees, grass, pine needles, healing toward forest. I pace down the mountain. Dark clouds blow through remaining light against the sky. Dusk settles densely on the steep ridge. I climb the front steps and walk into my cabin. In the darkly shadowed interior, a body hangs from a ceiling joist. My heart slams into my breastbone, and I hit the light switch. In sudden electric light, there is no body. The cabin is as I left it.

I breathe deeply. I calm down. "What in hell was that about?" gathers in my mind like dark clouds gathering for a storm.

When I came into consciousness in the hospital and realized how badly the wreck had injured me, I knew I faced hard times. It might have been easier if I had been killed. That was a brief thought. Gratitude for my life and for all life, joy and love of life, given to me as a gift, replaced fear and self-pity.

What could my vision of a hanging body have been but a suggestion from my own mind? Do I delve into dark residues of history? Three years ago, long before I came here, Lyle killed Bob in the driveway with a sledgehammer after a drunken argument over a pocket knife.

To hell with both ideas. To hell with visions or suggestions. I came here because the rent is small, and I have almost no money. The driver who hit me had no job, no property, no money, no insurance. Medical bills ate most of the money from my uninsured motorist's policy. The so-called social safety net has holes so big, I fell through without touching any ragged edges. I'm here because I find strength and healing force in these mountains.

"At the end of the day, you're another day older, and that's all you can say for the life of the poor... and the righteous hurry past... and the winter is coming on fast, ready to kill..."

I wonder if I can work out that song from *Les Miserables* on my guitar? I open the tattered black case, take my guitar out, and strap it across my shoulder. I pick through chords. I can't touch that song. I can't get the chords right. I'm not sure I have the melody right, so I let go of it, and I build my own song.

"Oak leaves turn in falling wind and cushion the earth beneath my feet as I walk/ Green ferns grow dense in the drainage I cross on my borrowed trail/ I flush a covey of mountain quail/ and three deer stop to watch me walk in gentle wind..."

Rain drums on my cabin's metal roof. Past midnight, I snap my guitar back into its case, climb into bed, and sleep.

Sun rises above tall trees. Brilliant, warm sun shines onto my front porch. I walk out onto the porch when Sam drives in. Gently dark Sam Alfaro takes his guitar out of his pickup below me at the end of my driveway. He turns and looks up at me from retreating shadow of the ridge and trees on the ridge and asks me, "You got any new songs?" He walks into sunshine, up the rising slope, climbs the board steps, and stands by me in mountain morning sunshine.

"I got one called, 'I think a lot about things; that don't buy me no wings to fly on out of this life I been leading.' I just got it last night. I haven't written it down, yet."

He straps his guitar on and says, "Sing it."

I fumble clumsy-fingered on my guitar with it, find control and build a song. Sam plays with me. Two guitars and a human voice resonate into washed mountain-blue sky above pine trees, fir, madrone trees, manzanita brush, sere grasses, and oak trees growing close together on west slope of the Sierras.

After the song, we go into my cabin, and I cook pancakes. Sam eats breakfast with me and then drives away into sunshine to clean someone's yard of summer's accumulation. He works odd jobs a little and plays music a lot.

Late afternoon, Diana drives up between tall trees growing on steep ridges both sides of my gravel and mud driveway. I walk out onto the front porch of the cabin clinging to steep slope near the foot of the ridge. Diana gets out of her old, rusted, Ford sedan, shuts the door, and stands slim in sunlight, as beautiful as ever, dusky skin, hawk nose and eyes. Her long black hair reflects points of red from sunshine. Earth turns our steep western ridge's tall trees across the face of the sun and leaves us in shadow.

Diana looks up at me and says, "Come on, Jon. Let's go dancing."

"Dancing? I almost can't walk, and you want to go dancing?"

"Remember when you told me the only thing that could ever keep you from dancing was if you were dead?" She says, "You don't look dead to me."

I ask her, "Are you going to drink?"

"Yes. You drive. I'll buy you all the soda pop you can drink. I'll drink all the alcohol, enough for both of us."

I drive, even before she starts drinking, down the winding mountain highway to town, and we walk into a bar. Cigarette smoke drifts through the building, and loud voices. People begin to lose control after drinking alcohol. We squeeze

between people to the hardwood floor and dance. I can't understand what the man sings into the microphone, but I dance a wild dance to the guitars, the violin, and the drums. Sometimes my knee gives way or my balance deteriorates, but Diana watches me, moves fast, catches me, and helps me stay on my feet. She says, "You got a whole new style. You'll have everyone on the ridge doing the 'Catch me honey, I'm headed for the floor again' in about a week."

We walked out into mountain night when the bar closed. In the small town, with limited electric light, we watched the stars scattered across the sky the way Coyote threw them in the beginning. I helped Diana keep her balance beneath the stars in the sky toward the car. Dark clouds slid down the mountain. Lightning cracked rock of the mountain. Thunder shook the night. I drove Diana home and helped her into bed. I took her babysitter home and drove back and slept on a pad on the floor by Michael's crib.

Rain turned to snow before morning. Prodded awake by daylight, Diana drank coffee and watched snow fall into ponderosa pine trees outside her kitchen window. She said, "Cold out there. I'll take you home."

"You're still drunk, and you don't have very good tires on your car, I think you'd better go back to bed, sleep off a hangover. I'll get home."

I hitch hiked up the mountain, caught a ride in a Volkswagen bus whose tall, pale driver drove like he had been born and grew up in a snowstorm. He let me out right at my driveway. Three inches of snow covered the ground. I walked up to my cabin, split kindling and built a fire in my stove. The smell of wood smoke clung to me. I ate lunch. On the side of the mountain in a snowstorm, I heard no sounds of man at all.

I changed into my insulated boots and walked up the mountain. Large flakes of snow fell slowly, silently into the high meadow. Six fruit trees have grown wild for fifty years, a gathering place for bears, deer, and coyotes, who harvest plums and apples when the season is right.

I moved to this mountain when harvest was almost finished. I ate winesap apples and golden delicious apples, small, crisp, and sweet in sharply-angled autumn sunshine. I walked through shin-tall grasses fading to the color of autumn sunshine.

Apples and plums are gone for the year. Winter snow, more than six inches deep, bends meadow grasses flat and still drifts down, large, silent white flakes from dark sky.

I walk back toward the cabin. Snowshoe hare tracks and

coyote tracks mark snow where I walked on the way up, red blood on white snow. Coyote carried longears to some secluded place for a meal. Falling snow covers tracks and blood.

Chip, tall, powerful New Jersey city boy, still tan from summer, nineteen, transplanted to the Sierras of northern California and still adjusting to the change, stayed with me part of that winter, two or three days at a time. I said he could stay all the time, but he said, "If I do, we'll hate each other in two weeks. This way, I got a place to land when it's too cold to sleep in my car and I can't line anything else up, and we'll still be friends come spring."

He brought food, sometimes a ten dollar bill or a twenty. He said, "That comes from four cords of the best oak firewood on the ridge. I'll never cut enough to get rich, always enough to pay what I have to pay. Don't hesitate. It's my share of the rent."

He brought up a box of oranges. They weren't great oranges, not sweet enough. We stuck the box under the kitchen sink and forgot it.

Snow accumulated more than a foot deep on my mountain. I walked every day. I walked every night there was enough starlight or moonlight to see to keep my balance. I gained strength and stamina slowly. Sometimes, after the wreck, pain in my intestines and chest immobilized me.

Diana drove up when I was off my feet and trying to lie totally still, panting tiny, fast breaths because it hurt to breathe. She opened the door and came in when I didn't answer her knock. She knelt by my pad on the floor and touched me. She said, "Let me take you to the doctor."

"They don't know what it is or what to do."

"I can get you some reds," she said. "I can probably get some 222s. I think I can get some codeine." I shook my head. She said, "I'll pay for it. I have some money."

I got a few words at a time out between shallow, rapid breaths. "When I was in the hospital, drugs almost killed me. They didn't even know which drug. Dangerous as hell. They thought I was brave for stopping pain medication when my leg was still in shreds. I was chicken as hell. I never want to be in that body-numb, mind-dead place again. I'll get through this. Eventually, it passes. Get out of here before empathy destroys you. Come back when I can dance again."

I asked cold winter air, "Where in hell did my vision of a hanging body that persists like memories of dreams and comes to me again when I'm not ready for it come from?" I knew it came from some dark part of my own mind, that told me to

quit, give up and die. During winter's long, dark nights, discouragement and loneliness found me again and again in the small cabin on the ridge where trees grew toward winter sky.

I took my guitar from its case and tuned six steel strings, picked six steel strings in the small mountain cabin. I packed discouragement, loneliness and bitterness about how difficult living had become into black songs along with my vision of an unidentified body hanging from an exposed ceiling joist. I flat picked my big, resonant guitar. I sang dark, lost-hope songs up through the roof of my cabin into dark clouds above the mountain. Night and dark clouds absorbed songs and vision.

I climbed up from dark nights on songs I started singing as sinking deeply down dark blues. I found lighter music toward morning. My soul lightened toward morning. I leaned on music. I progressed through chords and found light, hope and joy in music even in darkly snowing mountain nights. I sang the power of life, the power of mountains. I climbed up thumping rhythm, rich multiple-string resonant tones of my guitar, up the numinous power of mountains and songs, into bright morning mountain sky, into joy of life. I climbed and found the joy of existence still stronger than submission to defeat toward nonexistence.

Rhythm on six steel strings becomes my heartbeat as snowstorms blow up the mountain, and sun rises, "Good morning sunshine/ Good morning springtime/ Good morning bluebird singing on a fence post/ Good morning, colors in clouds in the mountain sky." Life lies ahead of me. I dance, hike, and sing. I continue building strength and endurance.

Diana drove up the mountain, late afternoon. She stood by her car. Mountain wind blew her hair and scarf wild. She shouted between north wind and east wind. "I got chains for my car. I put them on myself." She flexed her arms to show her muscles for my view. "Come on. Let's go dancing."

Snow melted and ran into Little Butte Creek. Little Butte Creek ran down the mountain into Butte Creek, and Butte Creek ran into the Sacramento River. The Sacramento river ran to the ocean.

Chip picked up Sam and his guitar and brought his own guitar. They rode Chip's ancient, brown Chevy up the mountain. Diana drove up and brought Neal, the ugliest man any of us knew but the most beautiful in radiance of being, in love of everyone and everything around him. Neal brought a sack of blues harps and blew fluid tones against voices and guitars. We all traded songs at my outdoor table. Snow lingered

in shaded north slope. Sun shone on the ridge, on tall mountain trees, brush, grasses growing green, on earliest mountain spring flowers. Spring sunshine warmed us where we gathered together, and breezes cooled us.

Chip climbed the front steps and walked into the cabin. After a few minutes, his voice floated out into warm sunshine. "Hey Jon, you remember that box of oranges I brought up here the middle of that snowstorm last winter? They're still here. Know something? Their skins are hard as iron, but once you get 'em open, they're the sweetest oranges you ever put in your mouth."

He carried the box of oranges out and put it on the table. We hacked through dry, hard skins until deep orange flesh opened to us. Sam, Diana, Chip, Neal, and I ate juicy, sweet, messy oranges in mountain spring sunshine and looked at each other and laughed.

"Remember that," Chip said. He had juice on his face and hands. He hacked into another orange with an oversized knife. "A hard winter makes oranges sweet and good."

Sam incorporated that into a song about hard winter and warm spring sunshine he picked out of the blue mountain sky. "Oranges sweet as spring sunshine and six steel strings/ a blues harp wails in sunshine's golden tones..." Neal stayed right with him, blew fluid tones on a C harp. I finished eating my sweet orange, wiped my hands on my shirt, picked up my guitar, and followed them. Chip joined us.

We finished that song, and Diana said, "Play a song we can all sing." So we did. Busted flat in Baton Rouge, singing about dusty country roads and way down in the valley and log drivers burling logs down a fast-flowing river below where we sat on the warm mountain, halfway up the clean blue spring sky.

Human voices rise to the sky and blend with tones of steel string guitars and the smell of sweet oranges in spring sunshine in the Sierras. We are warm and together and satisfied, singing our way toward summer.