

House on the Bluff

Gordon got out of bed, picked up his pajama bottoms, and walked naked out onto the deck. The moon hung full in yellow-silver washed sky above forest on the western mountains. He walked across rocky ground to the edge of the canyon and looked down at silver and gold water flowing in moonlight far below him. Black stone bluffs stood above the stream in moonlight shadow below him.

Timber and brush grew above wild water of the creek. Wild air around Gordon smelled like summer, like dry, growing plants whose roots found water deep in soil and stone. Soft wind blew up the canyon wall. He smelled wild water from the stream far below him.

An owl flew across the moon. It looked down at Gordon, caught the warm updraft in its silent wings, and soared out over the canyon, then dropped into darkness of the cliff shadow.

Day began. Gordon watched, smelled, heard, and felt the slow beginning of daylight.

The sun rose bright and hot. The moon, huge, flat, and white in sunlight, sank behind the mountains west. He heard the children come out of the house. He turned and saw them running toward him. "Daddy."

Joan called from the deck, "Erica, Edward, stay back from the edge."

Gordon stepped into his pajamas, walked to the children and took their hands. He said, "Let's fix breakfast."

During breakfast, Edward said, "Mom, we wouldn't go past the rocks where you said we shouldn't."

"I know. I think I know. But it looked like you were running full-speed for the edge. I couldn't help being afraid and calling out." To Gordon, she said, "From up here, it looked like you were standing right on the edge."

Grass dried yellow and scorched brown in hot sun.

Gordon first came to this place more than two years ago, during a spring rain storm.

Early in April, he walked through lush, deep green grass. He hadn't brought rain clothes. He stood wet and enraptured at the canyon rim.

A hundred small waterfalls poured over the canyon rim, fell down the rock face below him, flowed down the bluffs below the ledge, and hurried toward white water roaring down the

canyon.

He walked between white oak trees, up the ridge, away from the edge, past the spring, where clear water welled up from dark stone and flowed toward the canyon. Rain soaked through his clothes and through his shoes. Cold penetrated his existence. He walked up to the fence and saw it was a big place, reaching from the fence to the edge of the canyon. He walked back to the car, sat inside, and ran the engine and the heater.

He brought Joan up to the place the next Friday. He drove down the dirt road under huge black-oak trees and out of the swale, onto the ridge, where white oaks, sparser and smaller than the black oaks, grew in drier ground. He drove down the long curve to level ground above the bluff.

They got out of the car, walked onto the bluff, and stood on black stone in sunshine. They looked down into the steep-sided canyon. Joan took Gordon's hand. A breeze blew around them.

They walked away from the canyon, up the ridge. Grass grew soft green below the spring. Frogs dove into the stream flowing from the spring and hid under leaves or burrowed into mud.

Joan said, "Look at this guy. I think he's going to talk to me." A pale, bright green frog held on, halfway up a locust sapling, looked at her, puffed up under his chin, and held the air. "Can't you make up your mind what to say?"

"He wants to ask you to kiss him. Maybe if I walk away, he won't be bashful about it."

"No, Gordon. He wants to tell me that being a pale green, beautiful tree frog fills him with so much satisfaction, he has to puff up his air-sack to hold all of it."

"What do you think of this place, Joan?"

"It's beautiful. How did you find it?"

"It's for sale. I read the advertisement and decided to look at it."

"Oh. For sale. Are you interested in buying it?"

"I am, if you are. Come on. I'll show you where we would build."

He walked an outline of where the house would be. "With the living room here and the largest windows on this side, and a deck coming out here, high on this end, overlooking the canyon."

Joan said, "It's so different to look at it as a place we might build and live than just someplace to look at the canyon, look at spring, visit with a tree frog."

"Can you visualize it?"

"I don't know. That's a big jump."

"Start at the start."

“Now? What if it diminishes the soft, spring-romance feel of this rare afternoon when we have time to be together?”

“It won’t. Part of romance is working out our lives together, trying to decide what’s just dreaming and what workable plans might be among the dreams.”

“Gordon, now I’m sure we’re aging.”

“I think so too. I’ve become very aware that time goes by. I want a more meaningful future. I want to build something we’ll still be building when we’re sixty, when we’re seventy, Some-thing that repays our work with something more tangible than a bank account and a retirement income. I’d like to build a place Erica and Edward could come to when they grow up and marry and have children.

“We could build this place so it would support us. We could plant a big garden. We could put in an orchard, for our own use, and to sell fruit and nuts. We could raise chickens and rabbits, maybe a cow or a goat. There’s enough ground here, and enough water.”

“Gordon, that’s so different from anything we’ve ever done.”

“I want it to be different from anything we’ve ever done. The way we’re headed now is so much the same, year after year, and so predictable. I see people, sixty, sixty-five, retired, and a lot of them are lost. They don’t know what to do. Their work was their meaning, and their work is done.

“People who live from the land build all their lives. They build something that feeds and supports them as they grow old.”

They held hands and walked across the area he had described as the house site, part way up the ridge, and down again as they talked.

Joan said, “It would be a big change for Erica and Edward.”

“It would be a big change for all of us. Don’t you get tired of being crowded into town with thousands of other people, no room to move around, no quiet, nothing of nature around you?”

“Trees grow all along the streets, Gordon. Lawns and gardens, shrubs, birds in the shrubs. Remember the bees that swarmed in the Ledbetter’s hedge last summer?”

“Joan, let’s buy this place and build here. We could build a big house and take in two or three foster children. Support payments from the state would make the payments on the place, and we could do the children some good. What better place for children, for teenagers, than all this beautiful country, less than an hour from town and schools but away from trouble centers for adolescents?”

Joan looked at spring, green on the land, and she looked up at Gordon. “That’s a lot to think about. Maybe our own children

are enough.”

“You’re so good with children. It would be good for all of us.”

“Gordon, I know why you’re able to sell insurance. You’re persuasive. The values you aim for are the right values. But you know me. I read every word in the policy and track down every reference. I don’t know. There’s so much you’re talking about that we don’t know anything about. We’ve never farmed. We’ve never raised fruit trees.”

“Plant a tree. It grows. We can read about taking care of trees. We can check around and see how they do it at some of the orchards farther up the ridge.”

“It would take a lot of money to buy it and build.”

“I know. I’m a dreamer, but I think it could be a practical dream. We could build it a little at a time. Build the house and move in. Build more while we live here. We have enough money to start, and I’m making good money.”

“I wonder if you’ve thought of every expensive piece of work that needs to be done before you can even start to build.”

“Like a half-mile of driveway to be graded and graveled so it can be an all-season road? A half-mile of power line? I haven’t thought of everything. Let’s write it all down and see if it’s even possible.”

They wrote it down. They shopped builders, driveway graders, gravel haulers, electricity installers. They wrote all the figures down, added, subtracted, and estimated. Then Joan said, “It’s possible. If you’re sure this is the way you want to go, I’ll put my energy into making it work.”

It took more than a year to bring title, plans, materials, and workers together to start building. Everything cost more than estimated.

They finished the interior of their new house themselves, to save money and to be involved with the building. Gordon, Joan, Erica, and Edward drove up weekends, put down flooring, nailed up sheetrock, taped the sheetrock, and painted, until they had two bedrooms finished, a usable kitchen, and the living room, with the big south window looking out over the canyon, over the valley where the canyon opened into the valley.

Spring brought lush green grasses again. They moved in and built the rest of the interior of the house around them.

Summer heated the ridge. The volume of water running from the spring fell. The storage tank Gordon had set up was too small. It filled from the spring at night and ran over in the early morning, but they seldom had enough water for everyone to shower in the evenings.

Gordon bought a thousand-gallon tank and set the smaller

one aside. When they had time to put in a garden, the smaller tank could accept overflow from the large tank, and they could water the garden from the small tank.

Before they started the garden, they needed to finish work on the house. Joan wanted an office separate from the house for all the paperwork she did for their insurance business. Gordon bought materials and framed the garage, shop, and office building a little at a time, when working on the inside of the house didn't use all his time.

Much of the time he should have been cultivating contacts, pressing possible sales, and improving existing policies, he built or put down carpet with Joan. They worked late together finishing the sheetrock in one room and painting another room.

Some early mornings, Gordon walked the rough country surrounding their place, through white oak trees and manzanita and whitethorn bushes. He stood on rocks ten feet above the dry, tall grass, or he stood on the edge and looked down into the canyon.

He didn't really want to sell insurance anymore. His earnings fell.

Mrs. Robinson let her policy lapse. He hadn't gone to see her, explained her policy again and reassured her that having insurance was smart. When he did go to see her, it was too late. She said, "I never see my children anymore. They seldom write. They never come to see me. They earn their own ways now. Let them."

He drove home from Mrs. Robinson's. He looked in the rear-view mirror. All the way up from the long curve that joined the floor of the valley to the base of the mountain, the highway lay empty behind him. He adjusted the mirror and spoke aloud. "She's right. Let them."

He woke at daylight. He walked to the edge of the ridge and looked down into the canyon. That stream has carried water toward the ocean many thousands of years. This mountain has been here longer than any man's understanding of time. And the living things. These trees, scrub oak, none of them over twenty feet tall, and yet some of them have grown here more than four-hundred years. Who knows how many years this moss near his feet has grown on these rocks? Deep green moss, grey moss, orange and red and green and grey lichen, reaching back dozens of centuries. He thought, immortality is in the earth, in the plants, in the continuation of life forms, not in the individuals.

Deciduous trees put on fall colors and dropped their leaves. Gordon felt nervous. but he didn't understand why. He walked the edge of the canyon one cool fall morning and realized a

busy, high-pitched, mechanical sound abraded his ease. Oh yes; cars and trucks speed along the freeway down in the valley, beyond where the canyon begins to rise up his mountain from the valley. The canyon's stone walls reflect the noise to him. At first he didn't recognize the sound, because he didn't expect it up here, twenty miles away, in his quiet place. It is autumn. Leaves have fallen. The earth is harder now, without as much cushion from growing plants. Now he hears the sound clearly.

There must be a way to tune the unwelcome noise out again. He watched a red-tailed hawk hunt the canyon rim, soaring on the warm updraft. Gordon thought, the hawk lives with that. Its senses are sharper than mine. It hears the machines. It dives down into the grey-brown smog to capture the small animals it eats. The hawk still lives the fullness of its life.

Erica needed orthodontic work.

Edward rocketed full-speed down the driveway on his bicycle and skidded in the gravel on the turn just above the house. The bike flipped, and Edward skidded away from it and smashed into a tree. Joan heard him scream from inside the house and ran. Gordon heard him from where he was nailing up siding and ran.

Edward bled from his gravel-scraped face, shoulder, and hands. Joan talked to him and calmed him down. Gordon ran to the house, called Erica, and brought the car up. They lifted Edward into the back seat and drove down the mountain.

Joan go in the back seat with Edward, held him and talked to him. "You're okay," she said. "You're all right. Everything's going to be all right." She reassured herself as much as she reassured him as they sped down the mountain highway into the valley. Erica sat in the front seat with Gordon, pale and silent.

The doctor cleaned and patched Edward. He said, "The abrasions are shallow. He'll heal without scars. The break is a simple fracture. Six weeks in a cast, and he'll be like new. You need to relax now. He's lucky. You're lucky. It could have been worse."

Edward slept.

Gordon said, "Our savings account is about gone."

Joan said, "I know."

"Coming down the mountain, I prayed the car would hold together. The shock-absorbers are shot. The way the car wallowed and dove into the turn by the sand and gravel place, I wondered if we'd all wind up in the hospital. I think the engine needs an overhaul. We're going to have to get it fixed. Insurance will pay most of the bill here, but not all of it."

They took Edward home. Joan and Gordon rearranged

furniture so Edward could sleep in the living room, at the center of things, where he was easier to take care of.

Gordon sat on a rock above the bluff. Heat lingered, stored deep in the rocks, long after the sun went down. Gordon tried to see what he should do. One goal he had aimed for was financial success. He had that for a while, but now, when he should be climbing up into the next income bracket, he was slipping down into the last one. He wanted to spend more and more of his time alone. He wanted to stop thinking and just be, like the trees and the manzanita, like the moss and the lichens.

At breakfast, he said, "We don't have enough money to finish the shop and garage and office building. I'm going to have to earn more money. That means I'm going to have to work more evenings."

Edward looked up at Gordon and then away.

Joan said, "Edward, it cost something to take care of your injuries, but that isn't why we're short of money. We were short of money before you Evil Knieved down the driveway. Insurance is going to pay most of the hospital and doctor bills."

Gordon said, "Building this place has cost us a lot of money. It took me a while to face the fact, but I'm going to have to overhaul the way I'm living."

Once he got back into determined motion, he enjoyed his work again. He believed the insurance he sold was valuable to the people who bought it. His pay was tangible recognition of the worth of the work he did. His income began to climb again.

Edward healed and resumed his activities.

Joan worked on the interior of the house, insulating, sheetrocking, painting, as she had time. They had almost finished the house.

Erica wanted to be in the junior-high marching band and in the debating society. Edward tried out for baseball and made the team. Gordon coordinated his schedule with theirs so he could pick them up after he finished work and they finished their activities. They usually got home long after dark.

Gordon contracted to have a fence built along the edge of the bluff. Two men set posts in concrete and put up wire-mesh fencing. They were not as careful to avoid disturbing rocks with their moss and lichen growth as Gordon wanted them to be, as he would have been. Still, they came close to meeting his standards. Gordon rearranged rocks in the early mornings until he was satisfied with the fence and the rocks that held it in place.

When the sun set through haze on the horizon, Joan leaned against Gordon. He put his arm around her. She said, "The fence doesn't interfere with the view. It holds the place together

and keeps it from slipping over the edge into the canyon.”

Close to midnight, they lay in bed together in moonlight shining through the window. Joan said, “I love this place. But I have trouble being here by myself so much lately. Sometimes, when I’m alone at night, it gets lonely and scary.”

“Scary? I can’t imagine being scared by anything here.”

“Some nights, I feel isolated and lonely and afraid. When you’re here, and I hear unexplained noises, they don’t bother me. I don’t have to understand what makes the sounds. When I’m alone, sometimes I almost panic. I want to understand what makes the noises. Unexplained noises begin to seem dangerous in a way they never are when you’re here.”

Coyotes sang, up the hill, above the spring.

Joan said, “I know coyotes are no threat to me. I love their singing, the same way you do. It makes me feel something about nature is still wild and unsubdued.”

Gordon got out of bed, walked over, stood near the window, and looked at the nearly full moon hanging in the clear sky, at moonlight washing the earth with pale, silver light. Coyotes sang again, two of them, or maybe three; their voices jumbled together, and it was hard to tell.

Joan said, “Sometimes when I’m here alone, I don’t see it like that. The coyotes don’t sound joyful and harmonious, a part of nature in balance the way they do when we’re all here.

“They sound savage and threatening, demented, as if the joy in their voices comes from knowing I’m alone and vulnerable, and they will destroy me. If I fall into that feeling deeply enough, they wouldn’t need to be near me to destroy me; fear alone could do it.”

Gordon walked back to the bed, sat down on the edge close to Joan and took her hand. “I didn’t know you felt like that.”

“I never did, until I was here alone.”

“We’ll move to town.”

“I don’t want to give up this place. I know what it means to you. I love the place too, when you’re here, when the children are here. I try not to be afraid, but all the reasonable thoughts in the world don’t dent my fear when it gets started. It doesn’t happen very often. I didn’t want to tell you about it and cause problems, but I had to say something. I had to do something about it. I’m trying to have it not be like that, but I had to talk about it.”

He looked at her in moonlight that shone softly golden through their bedroom window. He said, “This place is important to me, but it isn’t anywhere near as important as you are. The place hasn’t turned out the way we thought it would. We haven’t taken in foster children, because the place isn’t

ready. I'm not ready, either. I don't have much time with our children and with you. How could I spread myself any thinner and hope to do anyone any good?

"We haven't done anything about a garden, because we haven't had time. I thought we could make this place self-supporting. That could be done, but I don't think it's the way we're going to live. It doesn't work to draw a line between the work I do for a living and living. If we were going to make this place pay its way, we would have started in that direction. Instead, I've gone in the opposite direction. We depend on my work to support us, and that's a good way to live.

"I've been coming to the idea of moving to town, but it was a slow process. I thought our family could be together here. It's turned out we see each other less and less because we live so far from town. Living in town would be more supportive of the way we actually live. I just haven't had anything push me to do anything about moving, until now."

They settled into the place they bought in town. Edward and Erica blossomed with the opportunity for more social contact and more activities. They all worked together and built a small but productive garden in the back yard. They added shrubs, ornamental trees and fruit and nut trees to the yard. They revised the house to fit their needs.

Gordon visited the place on the bluff all he could. It served as a retreat for him at times after long intervals. They might retire there when the children grew up and left home, when Gordon and Joan had only the place and each other.

Three years after they moved, late in autumn, Gordon drove up to the place on the ridge, the cold morning of a cold day. Rain poured down. Wild grasses bent in the rain, heavy with water, and dropped seeds in offering to the ancient earth. Gordon walked the route he had taken his first time on the place, that rainy April morning. This time, he wore a raincoat, hat, and waterproof overshoes.

Memory took him back, even past their time on this place. He remembered walking wooded hills when he was a boy, when rain poured down. Rain obscured everything more than a hundred yards from him. He thought he walked alone on a natural earth. He walked across the hill until he saw the house below him in heavy rain on the edge of the bluff. Then he walked down the hill to the house.

Someone had been there. That someone could be so different from him jolted Gordon deeply.

They broke every window. They shattered every glass, cup, dish, everything breakable on the place. They took the carpet, except for the jaggedly-cut, nailed-down perimeter. They took

the wire mesh from the fence. They took some of the fence posts. The posts they left, they knocked down.

Someone rolled every movable rock along the edge of the canyon to the edge and over. The rocks bounced and crashed, smashing brush, scarring and breaking trees, tearing up grass and soil, a thousand feet down into the canyon.

Gordon walked across the place again and again. Rain stopped. Clouds broke up and let sunshine touch and warm the cold, wet earth. Gordon stayed most of the day. He walked in sunshine. He sat on the bluff and looked down into the canyon. Before sunset, he walked up the hill to his car.

He drove onto the highway in heavy traffic. He hadn't thought about it being the rush hour for commuters returning to the ridge after a day's work in the town in the valley, for commuters returning to the valley after a day's work in the town on the ridge. He hadn't thought about anything at all. Now, in heavy traffic, he began to think, to rejoin man's world.

Gordon told Joan and the children the place had been vandalized. He didn't describe the thoroughness of it, and he didn't mention the rocks pushed over the edge of the canyon. He kept that knowledge buried in a deeply brooding, inmost part of himself.

He won't sell the place. He doesn't need the money. He is financially comfortable. He is content enough with what he is and with what he does. He manages now more than he sells. He works reasonable hours. He meets his needs and his family's needs.

But he dreams a dream again and again, and the dream brings doubt, a feeling of discontentment, and some fear into his waking life.

In the dream, he wakes and looks at the full moon. He gets up and walks naked to the edge of the canyon. He stands high above the stream that reflects silver and gold in moonlight.

At different times, the house is different. It is as it was, as it is, and as it will become, completely rebuilt or completely deteriorated. Remnants of the fence lie in the rocks above the canyon in some of his dreams. In some of his dreams, the fence isn't there and never has been there. The fence never stands complete in any of his dreams.

In his dreams, he has no emotional reaction to his surroundings. The place where they built the house above the edge of the canyon simply exists.

An owl flies across the bright moon, close above him. The owl looks down at Gordon, catches air rising from the dark canyon wall in its silent wings, and soars out over the canyon.

Gordon sees the owl's huge, yellow eyes in bright

moonlight.

He becomes the owl. He soars through moonlit night and looks down at the naked man on the clifftop, standing as still as the plants growing in moonlight, as still as dark stone of the steep bluff falling away in shadow toward the stream in the bottom of the canyon. He turns his wings and plummets into black shadow.

And wakes.

And remembers that, throughout his dream, he had no fear. He had no fear of the steep cliff. He had no fear of his sudden, swift flight. He had no fear of his nakedness in the universe.