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*pen doesn't work. switch back.*

### NATURE SHOCK

Or

How to Motivate a Spouse,

And

Other Sagas of Survival

In the Mountain West

Once upon a time I grew up in the mountains and, having attained full height (if not sense), went off to New York, Washington D.C., West Africa, Brazil, Ireland, and other soggy lowlands in order to earn my keep. Naturally I sneaked back to the Rockies every time the boss gave me time off. It was an offbeat trip, <sup>back then</sup> ~~at the time. Back~~ in the 'sixties a fellow could have the Firehole River all to himself, see nobody but buffaloes at Buffalo Ford, and drive the whole length of the Henry's Fork without meeting a soul unless you count moose, which I don't.

Perhaps <sup>my commuting</sup> ~~the~~ trip<sup>s</sup> from tidewater to high desert would have continued to seem routine, if I hadn't gotten married. My bride was from the southernmost tropic of Ireland -- not as steamy as West Africa or New York or Washington D.C., but within the palm-tree zone, all the same. She shared my enthusiasm for a summer escape to the Rocky Mountains. Not that she had ever been there. We just talked a lot about high country, and the conversations prompted her to acquire an alpine trousseau. All of the clothing was, in my opinion, fetching, but she did not believe me when I told her everything it would fetch.

I accept full responsibility for the rest of the confusion. I am guilty, as charged, of telling her that Slough Creek was paradise, and I should have added that paradise is never easy to reach. You get there by climbing over a pass with a pack on your back. There are some guardian angels with little pointy noses, too.

To understand what happened next, you have to be aware that there are no snakes, bears, or mosquitoes in Ireland. St. Patrick expelled the snakes (as any Irishman will confirm), thereby making them mythic creatures, terrifying in their absence. The good saint did not <sup>hang</sup> ~~get involved~~ with grizzly bears but they are big enough to be terrifying without help. A miserable little creature like the mosquito is hard to notice in <sup>such</sup> ~~this~~ company. Every time I tried to explain, Anna interrupted to ask about the bears and the snakes.

For our hike into Slough Creek, she wore a fetching pair of

shorts, thereby making her legs a mosquito cafeteria. (Did you ever try to tell your wife what to wear?) She is about a foot shorter than me, which normally means that I walk a quarter of a mile and then sit on a rock to wait till she catches up. That changed when she was motivated by her first mosquitoes. She disappeared over the pass, leaving me struggling along behind. She reached the campsite, set up the tent, swatted the mosquitoes that had sneaked inside the netting (just a few <sup>hundred</sup> ~~hundred~~), and would not emerge till the evening chill had chased off the rest of them, quite as effectively as St. Patrick could have done it.

The mountains are a piquant sort of paradise. The good news was that we saw no bears or snakes.

Most of us do time in the humid lowlands because because that's where the jobs are, but today more <sup>outdoor people</sup> ~~Americans~~ migrate to the high west because that's where the trout are, [and the big game, and six kinds of grouse, and so on.] That's America for you. When our forefathers were forefathering, they did not lay the place out conveniently, so we <sup>move around.</sup> ~~migrate~~. This is not a complaint. <sup>Migrating</sup> ~~Flying~~ is a privilege when you don't have feathers.

But you feel odd, at first, and maybe guilty because you are not having fun yet. The mountain west violates the fitness of things. You trade hazy skies and green woods for sharp-edged peaks. The lowlands were intimate; the mountains keep their distance. Their abundance is of a violent, Pleistocene kind. The high-altitude sun exaggerates contrasts of light and shadow, of

alkali flats and glacial lakes, of dry gulches and rivers  
roaring-bright, of hungry grasshoppers and meadows plump with  
elk. The uplands of Africa feel the same way. Nothing else does.

Mind you, I am not promising better fishing, hunting, and  
hiking than you have at home. The best is what you enjoy most,  
and most of us enjoy the reassurance of familiar things. Everyone  
who travels to a foreign country gets culture shock, <sup>which</sup> ~~and the best~~  
~~way to cope with it is to face it.~~ It is, technically, an  
emotional disturbance. Nature shock is just as unsettling.

[ Prince Maximillian, one of Montana's first tourists, wrote  
this while he was floating the upper Missouri in 1833:

"I could not help making comparisons with my journeys on  
Brazilian rivers. There, where nature is so infinitely rich  
and grand, I heard, from the lofty, thick, primeval forests  
on the banks of the rivers, the varied voices of the  
parrots, the macaws, and many other birds, as well as of the  
monkeys, and other creatures; while here, <sup>[in Montana]</sup> the silence of the  
bare, dead, lonely wilderness is but seldom interrupted by  
the howling of the wolves, the bellowing of the buffaloes,  
and the screaming of the crows. The vast prairie scarcely  
offers a a living creature, except now and then herds of  
buffaloes and antelopes, or a few deer and wolves. These  
plains have certainly much resemblance . . . with the  
African deserts."

The African comparison might have given the Prince a clue as  
to what was going on. So might the buffaloes, antelope, deer, and

wolves, or the elk with antlers 4'1" long in a straight line, carrying ten points on a side.

2222. I fell for Maximillian's illusion when I lived in Brazil. With all those trees, there had to be lots of wildlife -- but there wasn't, unless one counted insects. The bigger Brazilian birds and mammals preferred the grasslands. The rain that produced the forests had also leached minerals out of the soil.

There are places in the Rockies where it rains now and then -- I even live in one of them -- but most of the moisture comes as snow, and most of that is caught by the mountains. Snow is "the best fertilizer," as farmers used to call it. It protects plants all winter and then recedes gradually from the lower elevations to the summits, melt-water filling the springs. Then, since water in the ground runs downhill (unlike humidity in the air), last winter's snow shows up in the streams. You fish a sunny spring creek in the valley and watch next year's stream dropping onto the peaks from a snow-cloud.

There is an unusual thing about the Rockies: mountains and plains are interwoven, with isolated ranges sticking up here and there. We are lucky. The Alps and the Andes are not like that. Those parched valleys winding through the Rocky Mountains are mineral-rich. They produce big trout and big animals. They produce more of everything, except air and trees. You miss the thick deciduous trees but not the thick air. The first thing you notice about high-altitude breathing is that your hay fever has

gone and things smell fresh. It feels strange, at first. You knew how to simmer with dignity, but dry-roasting is a new sensation. You are not imagining things. High-altitude sun does affect you in a different way. You need to change your defenses, starting with your clothes. You would worry intuitively about a mountain winter, but cold air is much the same everywhere because it cannot hold much humidity. The wet and dry ways of getting hot are different. I don't think I've ever seen them explained.

When you go fishing -- or early-season hunting -- on a summer day in humid country, your problem is that your body cannot rid itself of the heat it generates. That's because sweat is slow to evaporate in air that is already full of moisture. You try to decrease the load by wearing clothes that are designed for letting heat escape -- like shorts. All of your clothes should be designed to let heat out.

In dry country the problem is to keep heat from getting in. You still generate some of your own, of course, but a bigger problem is solar gain from that unfiltered sun. When you step out of it, into the shade of a tree, you find instant comfort. But you may not find as many trees along your favorite high-altitude stream, so you carry your own shade. One scientist suggests that humans developed large brains because the sun damaged so many brain cells during hot-weather hunts. This evolution, however, took millennia. You and I don't have time to wait for natural replacement of cooked cells, so we want a big hat -- maybe a straw one like the cowboys wear. It scares trout faster than

anything except a kid throwing rocks, so you learn to crawl. You get trout or comfort but perhaps not both.

That Yellowstone evening makes another point about dry climates: they swing fast. Back east, if you are sweating and slapping mosquitoes all day, you may have to do the same all night. Not in the high country. Heat that comes from direct solar gain swings with the sun. In the Rockies, the summer temperature commonly drops thirty or forty degrees on a clear night, and most nights are clear. You put on a wool shirt. If there is wind, you put on a light nylon shell. On the east coast, the average drop on a summer night is about half as great, and you need a raincoat more than a windbreaker.

You may hear that you should let your eyes cope in nature's way, without sunglasses. If you were not already wary of quacks telling you about nature's way, get suspicious now. The eskimos did not adopt eye protection because Yves St. Laurent made spectacles look chic. Bright sun turns unprotected eyes red and itchy. Same with unprotected skin. It is perfectly natural, like fried brains, but faster.

You can also avoid nature shock by taking your home environment with you. Last summer a car with California plates pulled up by a little pond where I was smelling swamp and listening to \* blackbirds tootling like toy trains. I was also catching brook trout that weighed nearly a pound, but when anybody was looking I was pretending that the fishing was bad. I

stood there looking bored and watched a busy couple jumped from the car. The man shouldered his camcorder while the woman hooked it up to the car by an umbilical cord. He panned the scene carefully while she narrated. The car idled, air-conditioner compressor clicking on and off. Maybe when they got home they sat down and looked at where they had been.

Leat w/ current A 1, then:

A 2 on uniqueness of Rockies (plain + urban in between)

Then to preparation: long sleeves + pants, glasses, etc.

Like doctors, some fishermen give advice without taking humidity into account. I know a beginning fisherman in the east who was persuaded to spend big money for sunglasses even before he owned waders. His new specs would have been good for Montana: they had photochromic lenses with real glass surfaces. I, at least, can't use such glasses in the east. Photochromic lenses darken quickly, but they take a long time to lighten in color. When I walk into the shadow with them, I can't see the fish. The best thing under humid skies is a pair of plastic polarizing clip-ons. These cheap lenses can be flipped up without delay. But they don't provide enough protection in the west, except on the occasional dark day.

[ If there is anyone that I have not insulted, let me know and I will try to correct the omission. I would like to get you so worked up that you take a look. ]

wet climate and escape (or will when you can) to a high, dry one. That's America for you. When our forefathers were forefathering, they had bigger problems than laying the place out conveniently for sportsmen. So today we migrate about as often as the geese, but in a different direction.

Mind you, this is not a complaint. Flying is a privilege when you don't have feathers. And when you're grounded, the fishing near home is good anyhow, because you're prepared for it. You know how to manage the expeditio

[If you are planning to make the trip, there are some things you might like to think about. I know easterners who can cross the Atlantic comfortably, but not the Missouri. Europe is a great place to go, for cities and museums. In Europe you get culture shock. In the Rockies you get nature shock.

I will not speak to you of comfort. You can find it anywhere; a dude ranch in Montana has the same soft springs and numb television as a resort in Pennsylvania. But comfort is a flaccid thing. The lowlands are for comfort; the mountains are for stress.]

Laws made in Washington still assume that big Douglas firs are renewable resources (which they are, given four hundred years without acid rain, greenhouse effect, fire suppression, or grazing).

[keep heat out/let it out]

[nature shock/culture shock]

[more of everything except trees and air]

The west was cut up to fit eastern ideas. They brought us the dust-bowl, the dams, the mines, the tree-cutters and the tree-huggers. Easterners could not imagine what would happen to dry land when native sod was turned wrong-side-up by a plow. If you read the national press, you might suppose that western resources are land, crops, cattle, trees, and recreation. Those are all derivative. The fundamental western resource is water. You wouldn't think of that if you live where it rains.

Mind you, we western boys have done no better when left to our own devices. We find it difficult to hit a compromise between wilderness areas and overgrazing. We waste tons of topsoil to grow every bushel of the wheat we can't sell. We get rich and get out or go broke and ask for help. We grow too lazy to ride and start hunting from pickup trucks. We have more rivers, fish, and game than anyone else, so we squabble over them. We are good at fighting and bad at negotiating.

The man from humid country descends from farmers -- moderate, tolerant, skeptical, down-to-earth. The Constitution is our national law \* but could only have evolved in the east. The man of the high desert is intense, heedless,\* believing, exalted. The cowboy is our national hero but could only have evolved in the west.

You have that strange hot/cold, dry/wet, high/low, steep/flat country to get used to.

The high west is a mixture of heaven and hell like everywhere else, but the angels have not quite lost the fight yet. You ought to have a look while there is still time.

In the lowlands, the air is wet but the streams get low every summer. Mountain air is dry but the streams run full.

In the lowlands, streams run warm. Humid skies act like a greenhouse, letting the sun's rays through to heat the earth and water but then hinering the outward [longwave] radiation of heat.

Clear mountain air lets the water's warmth radiate into the atmosphere at night. [But temperate, moist, ocean-influenced climates are good, especially if the terrain is steep. Applies to Britain, Ireland, some other parts of Europe, New Zealand, Tasmania, and Patagonia. Per Ray White's Wisconsin publication.]

Perhaps leaching explains why the Rocky Mountains, strictly speaking, are not very fertile. The Indians who lived in the peaks were impoverished because game preferred the plains. When the vast herds were wiped out a century ago, the elk retreated to the mountains -- but they return to the plains in winter if they can.

During hot weather in the Atlantic states, for example, you may prefer visors -- not hats -- so that sweat can evaporate from the top of your head (a major heat-producer).

The thin air has other consequences. When you show the slides you took in Yellowstone Park together with those you took during a lowland summer, the latter will look as if you had mud on your lens. Pictures taken through dry air are clear, sunny, and full of sharp colors.

If you can stand it, however, leave your camera home and use your five senses.

The mountain sun -- with no humid air to filter it -- pounds down on you as brightly as on a camera.