FICTION

Epiphany

Tory C. Anderson

WE HAD BEEN UP THERE FOR TWO MONTHS when the clouds came in. It happened overnight. When I crawled into my sleeping bag the night before, the air was dry and clear. The mountain tops and tree-lined ridges stood black against a starlit sky. I looked down into the darkened canyon below and followed it out to the valley fifty miles away where I saw lights of people I didn't know but longed to be with.

The clouds infiltrated our canyon without a sound. They slid easily over dead pine needles and through dry branches as they climbed up the mountainside and overran our camp. When I got up in the very early hours of the morning to relieve myself, the clouds were there, sucking on the trees and making everything drip. There must have been a full moon above them because the clouds glowed in the dark like a television screen just after it has been turned off. I didn't dare walk farther than the corner of the tent because anything could have been hiding just five steps away—and these were the mountains where Sasquatch had been sighted so many times. The dead and twisted lower branches of the tall tamaracks reached down toward me through the clouds as if in misery and wanting my help. But there was nothing I could do for them, and I retreated back to the tent and slid into the warmth of my sleeping bag without taking the time to brush the soil off the soles of my feet.

When morning came, I awoke to my dad's call, "Rise and shine, it's trail-building time!"

I thought my short midnight experience had all been a dream, but when I stepped out of the tent I found that the rest of the world had ceased to exist and that our camp was floating in a sea of nothing. In the center of our camp kneeled Dad, next to the fire, frying bacon, eggs, and pancakes on a skillet. Near the skillet sat two pots—one with bubbling oatmeal and the other with steaming chocolate. Behind Dad was our table on which sat plates, utensils, boxes of Bisquick, containers of syrup, and cans of fruit and vegetables. The table and everything on it leaned with the hillside. Beyond the table was the other tent, resting on the edge of the misty nothing. It was tilted too.

"Dad," I said. He turned his head and squinted at me through the smoke film on his glasses.

"Get a plate," he said. "The first gets the best."

He stacked the pancakes in one corner of the griddle and poured more batter. I got a plate and Dad loaded it with pancakes, eggs, and bacon. He handed me the cup of hot chocolate from which he had been drinking. I went to the table and poured maple syrup over my pancakes. It rolled out thick and cold. The smoke was drifting north so I sat down on the south side of the fire in the dirt.

"It's foggy," I said.

Dad grunted.

I was hoping he would say more, that he would tell me a story about being lost in fog while building some other trail and finding his way back by yelling, "AHAAA," and the guys in camp yelling back, "TASHNIK." He says that "Aha" in Indian means "I love you," and "Tashnik" means "I love you, too."

But Dad kept his stories to himself that morning, like he had most mornings lately.

Out of the other tent staggered the rest of the trail crew wearing their worn boots and dusty clothes. Hair stuck up in all directions. They slipped out into the nothingness to take care of morning business and sounds of running water carried through the fog. One by one they materialized out of the fog and drifted to the fire like ghosts. I thought one of them would say something about the fog, but there wasn't a word.

I understood their silence. It had been only the eight of us for two months now. We worked all day with no radio or television. At first we talked as we built each section of trail. We told jokes and asked riddles. (There's a man who's afraid to go home because there's a man there with a mask on. What's the situation?) There were in-depth analyses of the virtues and vices of girlfriends, past and present. (Aleeta has a beautiful face and a pair of hooters you can't believe, but she can sure bitch.) There were discussions on sports and hobbies. (During a karate competition one of Ray's opponents kicked him in the groin and crushed one of his testicles. The doctor told him it shouldn't alter his family plans, though.) We traded detailed plot lines of movies and kept each other entertained.

But after so many days and weeks talk ran short and we sat there eating, dumb, like cows grazing at pasture. The only sounds were the scraping of forks on plates, chomping, and an occasional burp or fart.

The silence, like the fog, bothered me. "If you leave the trail today you're going to get lost," I said to everyone. No one even grunted. I waited a few moments and then asked Freddy, "Have you seen *The Fog*?"

"Yeah. Pretty intense, huh?" he answered, and then stared at the fire again while slurping milk-thinned oatmeal.

"Well, let's hit it," Dad said. "And try not to let the sunshine get in your eyes.

"Tory, you're lunch man today," he added.

The guys stacked their plates on the table, grabbed their gloves, and started off down the trail to where we had stopped the day before. It was almost three miles. I dropped cans of tuna and fruit, packages of cookies and luncheon meat, two loaves of bread, and another package of cheese into the burlap sack and slung it over my shoulder. I stopped next to Dad where he was doing dishes. He would come up as soon as he finished. I wanted to talk, but I didn't know what words to say.

Dad glanced at me and said, "Have a nice walk."

Dad and I used to be buddies. He got along well with all the men, but with me being the youngest crew member as well as his son, he had treated me with special consideration. There was the hot chocolate he brought me in the mornings while I was still in my sleeping bag. There were the stories he told me at night after we turned the lantern out. During the days there was the hand on my shoulder as he passed me on the trail after inspecting my work, or the winks he threw my direction when we stole glances at each other, the sweat running into our eyes.

But what I missed most were the talks we had while walking back to camp after the work day was done. We would take our time, falling far behind the others, and he would tell me about climbing telephone poles like he did while he was in the army; about how terrifying it was to accidentally slide down or "burn" a pole. Or about driving a bulldozer pulling a plow on a dry-farm in Sublett, Idaho. He didn't see another human being all day and the field was so big it took almost half a day to make each pass. In return, I told him about flunking Mr. Allred's advanced algebra class and kissing Jenny in the back of the band bus when we were returning home from a contest in Jerome. It had been weeks since we had talked like that.

The following Wednesday I would turn sixteen. Dad would bake a cake on the fire and use pitch wood for candles like he did the year before. But unlike the year before I would be sixteen—old enough to drive, old enough to date, almost a grown-up.

"You can do anything you want when you're grown up," I told Dad.

"If you can stand the pain," he had answered. Didn't make any sense to me.

I walked through the trees to the trail. It disappeared both directions into the clouds. I needed to turn right, but in a sea of nothing it didn't seem to matter which way I went.

I tried to imagine I was floating through the fog without worry or pain, but the crunch of the soil beneath my steel-toed boots and the bite

of the blister on my heel anchored me to this world.

I came to a place where the trail skirted a gully. There was a good thirty foot drop to where a creek ran wild during the spring run-off. I couldn't see it today, but ten feet down the steep embankment a gigantic boulder stuck out of the hillside. On the side of the rock facing the canyon were indentations that formed a near perfect chaise lounge. I had eaten my lunch on that rock when we had built that section of the trail five weeks before. On that day the lounge had commanded a perfect view of the tamarack-filled canyon, the rugged mountains with their rocky peaks that invaded the painted turquoise sky.

Leaving the lunch bag on the trail, I stepped over the edge and began sliding down the mountainside. I wondered if the rock was still there. I smiled when my feet made contact.

Doing the crab crawl I made my way to the chaise lounge and stretched out. The rock was cold against my back and I shivered, but that was okay, because on the rock the sense of floating in the silent gray-white was real. For a moment there was peace. The nothingness of the fog isolated me from the rest of the world. Gone was the senior year of high school I faced. Gone was my mother who told me I was going to try out for the school musical just for the fun of it. Gone was Maren with her pretty face and seductive body—there would be no more love/hate games between us. Mr. Allred and his advanced algebra class had no power in the fog—I wouldn't have to retake his class. I didn't have to decide whether I had enough money to get a semester of college in before my mission. I wouldn't have to marry and suffer like my dad. I didn't have to do any of these things because right then I was God.

"To hell with you," I mumbled. Sitting up I raised both arms. "I'm God I say," I said aloud.

"Tory! Are you down there?" My dad's calling startled me.

I quickly crawled back across the rock and using my hands and feet scrambled back up to the trail. I found Dad holding the lunch bag in one hand. He looked worried.

"Hi," I said.

"What were you doing down there?" he asked.

"Uh, just . . . having a morning devotional," I answered.

"Oh," he said. "And talking to God, huh? The mountains make you want to do that, don't they." He put his arm around me and gave me a squeeze.

I nodded and felt relieved when he removed his arm from my shoulders.

He turned and started walking up the trail. I reached forward and pulled the lunch bag from his hand. "It's my job today," I said.

I studied Dad as he walked. He was a balding, big chested man with

no butt. He had been an executive for the Boy Scouts of America but had quit.

"Executive life is tedious and trivial," he had said. Mom couldn't understand it.

"Grunt labor is tedious," she answered.

Trail building wasn't grunt labor to Dad. He said it had the glory and rewards of growing a beautiful garden. Trail work came naturally to him. I wished it did for me.

Trail building kept dad away from Mom months at a time. I never heard either complain. People always asked me, "Why does your mother let him go?" I just shrugged. Mom was an independent woman and Dad was a mountain man.

I think Mom loved Dad. But she never showed it. Dad's love for Mom showed. A couple of months earlier Dad called Mom. I saw him crying when he hung up the phone. That embarrassed me. Dad was a mountain man—big, strong—and mountain men look pitiful when they cry. Three weeks ago, when we had made the long trip into town, he had argued with Mom on the phone. I had never heard them argue before. It was after that that things started changing. Now we were walking in the fog.

"Dad," I asked, "when you were a kid, did you ever dream you would be high in the mountains in the fog building a trail someday?"

He walked on without speaking and I thought he hadn't heard me. But then, without missing a stride, he said, "No, Tory, I didn't. But you're going to do a lot of things in life that you never dreamed of."

I wondered what he meant by that—was it good or bad? Dad was the grown-up, and being a grown-up put him in the place I was going. I wanted to ask him what it was like, like I did my friends when they were coming out of the early show and I was going into the late one.

"Are you happy?" I asked, all in one blurt. That seemed to me to be the ultimate question. I was terrified of the answer.

Dad stopped suddenly. We were in the wooded area now and Dad looked out into fog shrouded trees. There was no sound, not even a whisper of breeze in the limbs.

"I've been thinking about that very thing all morning," he said, finally, without turning to look at me. "I'm a free man. I've got the job other men only dream about. I'm healthy . . . and I've got a family. Yes, I'm happy." Then he started back up the trail. I followed.

For the first time in my life I didn't believe Dad. "Tell me the truth, Dad," I wanted to say but didn't.

We left the trees and came out onto an open hillside where the others were working. One by one they took shape as we drew near: first as a light shadow, then a solid grey, and finally in muted color. Alan was

swinging his grubhoe. Freddy and Todd were challenging a rock with a pry bar. Devon, Kyle, and Rudy were working on a small tree stump. Picking up my grubhoe I walked thirty yards up the mountainside to the next trail marker and started digging. On my first swing I hit a rock anchored solidly to the earth. The resulting jar rattled my whole body. "Damn!" I yelled, the word sounding foreign as it came from my mouth.

"The earth strikes back," said a voice in the fog to my left.

All morning we worked—together on the side of that mountain—each alone in the clouds. Around me I could hear the muffled sounds of metal forcing itself into the earth and of picks chinking rocks. Kyle connected his section of trail to mine. He floated out of the fog, slapped me on the shoulder, and then disappeared into the fog on the other side looking to start a new section.

Once more I imagined I was God of Fog. I dropped my grubhoe and raised my arms, fingers outspread. The clouds were the future and begged to take shape. I saw Mr. Allred's head form. He was droning on about algebra. One swipe of my hand sent him back to atoms. A podium appeared. Behind it Mrs. Waterstradt explained how important the senior year is in preparation for college. With both arms I sent her swirling upward to the land of Oz. And then Maren's face floated in front of me. Freckles, dimples, and green eyes. I reached out to touch; her face turned in on itself and was gone. "Go then," I said, swinging my arm through the mist where her face had been. "There's no place for you here in the fog."

"Tory. Come here and give me a hand." My dad's voice seeped through the clouds like water through earth. I walked up the trail fifty yards and found him sitting on a large rock.

"She's ready to go," he said. "I just need another pusher."

We squatted on the backside of the rock and on the count of three we put our bodies against the rock and slowly extended our legs like hydraulic jacks. Dad outweighed me by a hundred pounds. He was doing most of the work, but I was helping.

Through clenched teeth I heard Dad say, "Been sitting here a couple billion years. Doesn't understand why it has to move now."

My body was fully extended when the rock finally rolled. Dad and I fell into the shallow crater and watched. On its second turn it knocked down a sapling so swiftly that the water droplets, for the smallest part of an instant, hung in the air where the branches had been, and we were looking at a shimmering, liquid tree. Then it was gone. I was still staring when Dad turned to me and said, "Well, there you have it. Life and its

dreams."

I turned my head and looked at him.

"When you live life, you make dreams. The more life you live, the more dreams you have. The more dreams you have the more beautiful your death."

We stared at each other a moment and then he laughed. "Philosophers say things like that and people take them seriously," he said.

"I'm taking you seriously," I said. "I just don't know what you mean."

"I don't suppose I know either," Dad said, sitting up on the up-hill side of the crater.

"Hey, Todd," Kyle yelled from somewhere on the mountainside.

"What," came the answer from somewhere else on the mountainside.

"Did you know that on a clear day you can see forever?"

Even the fog waited for an answer, but there was no response.

"Todd?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Oh."

And there was silence again.

"I remember the way the hobos smelled when I used to cross the tracks to take Pop his lunch," Dad said, suddenly. "They would yell at me trying to get me to come over. I remember the anger I felt when I came home after school and found that Pop put the out-house over the hole I had dug and was using as a fort. I remember my first kiss, how Louella's and my nose squished together. There was eating beans out of a can for Thanksgiving dinner when I was a missionary in Canada, the dust in the toe of my boots while we stood at attention after a ten-mile march and the drill sergeant poured water over his head, the high I felt when I first saw your mother on that bus, the fear I felt when each one of you kids was born . . ." He trailed off and stared blankly into the clouds. I thought I could see the fog in his blue eyes.

"Do you know what it all means, Tory?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know either." He laughed, but the trail boss was crying.

"It's what makes me up," he said, suddenly. "Those experiences make Rodney Anderson. Take away any one of those experiences and you take away part of my existence—I'd fade away a little bit."

I just sat there and stared at Dad staring out into the fog.

"Even though I'm forty-five, I'm still fading in," he said, "not out. But fading in is painful like birth . . . you know?"

He was asking me, not telling me. He wanted me to confirm what he said. It seemed all wrong. He was supposed to tell *me* how it is—not ask. I stared at him answerless.

He said no more and we sat and listened to the fog. It whispered fearful things to me. My dad was gone. I had never seen this man sitting beside me before. My anchor had come loose. Inside me I reached out for someone, something, but there was nothing solid to grasp. The fog I had been playing with all morning suddenly turned on me. The feeling was worse than when the doberman I had teased every morning on the way to school broke its chain. The owner had called the dog off just before it reached me—standing there like a statue—and saved my life. Where was the owner now?

Dad put his arm around me and squeezed. Through the numbness that filled my body I felt his biceps against my shoulder and smelled his body odor. "Get back to work, slacker," he said.

Get back to work. After revealing to me the horror of life, that's all he had to say.

I walked down the trail. Muddy soil clutched the tread of my boots. Beside the trail lichens clung to a rock like paint. In those shimmering droplets of water I had seen the soul of a tree. I couldn't get it to mean anything.

The fog began creeping into my mind—I couldn't keep it out—and began dissolving my mother and father, my friends, my God . . . me. Filled with desperation I began working harder than I ever worked before. I swung my grubhoe violently, concentrating on the contact it made with the earth. The jar each swing gave my body fought the nothingness of the fog.

I dug into the earth, chopped a worm in half, exposed the roots of goldenrod. I hit hidden rocks, the resulting impact paining my hands. The pain felt right and I hit the rocks again and again until I broke their bond with earth and sent them rolling down the hill. After ten feet I couldn't see them, but I could hear them crashing dully into trees. A log lay decaying in my path. Fungus grew white in flat nodes along the rotted wood. I attacked it with my pick. The wood, the fungus, the ants within scattered around the hillside.

The fog grew heavier and I couldn't get it out of my lungs. I buried my hoe in the earth and screamed.

"Get a straight-jacket. Call the shrink. We got a live one here." It was Freddy. He came walking through the fog carrying his grubhoe and dragging the six-foot pry-bar. He smiled at me through his red beard. "Just remember," he said. "It's the rest of the world that's crazy, not us."

He passed me and walked back into the fog to work on another section of trail. I heard voices up the trail—not work voices but I've-got-something-new-to-talk-about voices. I walked up and found the crew gathered around Ray who held a fawn in his arms.

"I saw the mother run away and I nearly stepped on this little crit-

ter," he said.

The small fawn had white spots on its back. Its eyes were big and black. It shook with fear and bawled out for its mother.

"Its mother won't take it back now that you've touched it," Todd said. "She'll smell you."

"Why'd you pick it up, you idiot?" said Freddy.

"I don't know," answered Ray. "It sure is warm."

The fawn bawled again.

Dad walked up and gently stroked the soft fur on the fawn's back. "Better let it go," he said.

"But the mother won't take it back," Todd said.

"More chance of that than it surviving with us," Dad said.

Ray put it down on its twiggy legs and it bounded up the mountainside. For a time we could hear it bawling into the fog, and then it was gone.

At noon we sat against the flat smooth face of a rock and ate sandwiches and fruit cocktail out of cans. Nobody ate much. It was the fog and the fact that we had been eating sandwiches for lunch for two months now.

"I've never seen fog so thick," Todd said.

"I could have told you it was coming," Dad said. "Last two Oregon trails I worked, the fog came the first week of August and didn't leave until September."

I began breathing faster. Fog until September. I couldn't take it. They would have to carry me out in a straight jacket.

I worked hard into the afternoon. It was the only thing I could do. I wanted to talk to dad, to tell him how I felt, to ask him questions. He passed me once, eyes down on the trail, didn't say a word.

Late afternoon snuck in unnoticed. As the guys passed me on their way back to camp, I realized that the gray had deepened.

"There's a time to work and a time to play—give it a break, man," my dad said, laying a hand on my shoulder as he passed. I watched him disappear into the clouds, gave my grubhoe one more swing, and then sat down on the damp earth.

There were another four weeks on this trail. My friends had envied me when I told them what I'd be doing all summer. In their dreams of what trail building must be like, they probably never imagined sitting alone on a mountainside in the clouds.

"I'm a mountain man," I said aloud, but tears just rose up until they ran over my bottom lashes.

"I'm almost sixteen," I said, quickly wiping the tears away. I got up and started down the trail. What was I going to do? What could I do? As

I walked, sudden movement startled me. Flashing up the mountain through the fog I saw a doe and her fawn. They were so close I stiffened thinking they were going to run over me. I felt the doe's warmth as she passed.

The suddenness of the deer's appearance took away my tears as well as my breath. For an instant I forgot the fog and in that instant something changed. I thought it was something in me until I looked up to see the fog above me was thinning. Pale blue sky a long way's away peeked through. The long rays of the afternoon sun almost reached me as the clouds high in the canyon parted. They rolled back until I could see the valley miles away bathed in a golden yellow.

I stared, unable to move, unwilling to move. It struck me as a vision. Jacob had seen angels ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. I was seeing a valley soaking in sunlight. It was the most real thing I had ever seen.

"Oh, yes," I whispered, clenching my fists. "Yes." Just as quickly as it had appeared, the hole closed. The fog sucked at me once more, fear crept back. It played around my head like flies. But the golden valley—I had seen it. I couldn't see it now, but it was still there in my memory—in my dreams. The sight had been enough—enough to make me want the next four weeks, to want the next four years—to want whatever living life would bring.

"Dad, it's all right," I yelled. But the fog had entombed me and swallowed my words. Unafraid I took a deep breath, and as loudly as I could, yelled, "AHAAA." From somewhere farther down the mountainside I heard in answer, "Tashnik!"