

Hole in the World

One winter day in December, 1976, I fell over backwards while walking up an icy road. I was with two friends, out for a postprandial stroll on Deer Hill, a road that curved steeply past the end of my driveway. It was an old road, black-topped only a few decades ago, winding through the forests of the Hudson highlands from the village of Canterbury to the upper portions of Storm King Mountain, where a few anachronistic gentry still held modest estates. I was renting a castle, a beautiful little stucco simulation built in the 1940's, with a tower and orange tile roofs, large grass-papered rooms, rustic un-craftsman-like wood trim, and no insulation of any kind. In those days fuel oil was forty cents a gallon; the furnace burned about 1,600 gallons that winter at the castle.

The building was well known because it stood behind a fortress-like gate alongside the road, two imposing iron-framed wooden panels, now permanently open, that swung from large rusted pivots on a pair of ten-foot towers with their own conical tile roofs. The castle stood at the beginning of the property, defending a grand driveway that pierced through the overgrown estate straight toward the mansion, and an exceptional view of the long northern sweep of the Hudson River past Newburgh and Beacon. The mansion itself was gone, razed long ago, and the driveway now ended at an overlook obscured by untended trees.

We were walking just outside the gates, up the last stretch of Deer Hill Road to the top, where it wound back downhill and joined Mountain Road for an even steeper plunge down to the Hudson at Cornwall Landing, a few miles up-river from West Point. After a long meal of Christmas left-overs, and a little egg-nog, we were in a very relaxed mood, joking casually about

irrelevant topics, and having some trouble navigating the black ice under the snow on the road. As we picked our way to bare tarmac, I stepped on something indescribably devoid of friction, and my feet swept up into the air while my body rotated backwards, well past horizontal, until the back of my skull stopped on a bare patch of frozen pavement.

I felt no pain, but the world flashed pure white for a moment, and I heard the sound I believe a coconut would make, dropping 20 feet onto concrete. I remember thinking that my head, being roughly egg-shaped, could withstand a tremendous blow without cracking, but I couldn't imagine what else might have happened as my brain slopped up against the bone, protected by a cup of fluid and a few millimeters of dural membrane. No doubt it had squashed against the dark interior of my brainpan, deformed, and then sprung back, spongy, into its normal shape and slammed again on the interior of my forehead.

My walking companions heard the knock of skull on frozen roadway and turned around to see what happened. Perhaps I had also uttered something as I hurtled over backwards, or an onomatopoeic expletive at the moment of impact. I remember looking up at them, both staring at me in surprise, scrutinizing my expression to see if I'd been injured. Inside, I was still marveling at the fact that my body had swiveled through more than 90 degrees, picking up speed all the way, before coming up head-first on utterly unyielding ground, yet I was still conscious and not even in pain.

I stood up shakily, concerned mainly about preventing a repetition of the fall, and examined my sensorium. The hollow sound of my head hitting the ground still rang in my ears: I can hear it now, in fact, on a quiet evening, in a contemplative recollection of that moment. It is a sound no one should be required to hear. Nevertheless, I seemed to be uninjured. The back of my head wasn't even sore, and no bruise or tenderness appeared. When I feel the back of my skull now, I know exactly where it hit the ground, on the high point, the apex of its egg-like rigidity. A good design, no doubt refined by millennia of primates being knocked on the head in all manner of violent or accidental situations.

We all quickly recovered from my brief mishap, and continued our walk through the silent snowy afternoon, but my friends were concerned, as I would have been if I'd felt anything unusual. Thinking I might have sustained a concussion, they reminded me the most important course

of action was to remain awake and take it easy. As that was our original intent all along, we all thoroughly enjoyed our stroll through the winter countryside, and returned an hour later to the castle, for a final cheerful glass of rum-enhanced egg-nog.

Later that evening I sat by the fireplace and reviewed the symptoms of concussion in an old medical book from my library—headache, fatigue, disorientation, nausea, mood alterations, ringing in the ears, drowsiness—and I was experiencing none of them. Not even a bruise or tenderness at the point of impact. Nevertheless, that blow to my head had been truly massive, and for some days I continued to wonder why I had not been knocked out cold. If someone had come up behind me with a lead sap and struck me with his full strength, I don't think the impact would have matched that long fall backwards, down-hill, onto the frozen road. But the serene peacefulness of a crackling fire in my warm living room, with the snowy forest all around outside, cleared away all concerns and I soon fell into a happy reverie.

The holidays concluded swiftly, and my attention returned to a book I had been hired to revise for a publisher in New York. There were dozens of ways to reorganize the original manuscript, and Steve Anders, the publisher, insisted on a strategy meeting. On my trip into the city to meet with Steve, I did notice a slight change in my outlook, although it never occurred to me it might hold the slightest significance, and perhaps it didn't.

Cornwall Landing and Canterbury are a few hours North of midtown Manhattan, and the simplest way in was the Short Line bus from Newburgh. On the bus I could review my agenda, catch up on a little sleep, or just marvel at the brightly colored strip-malls crowding Routes 32 and 17 down to the Lincoln Tunnel. Then it was a short walk from the Port Authority bus terminal to Rockefeller Center, and the publisher's offices atop the McGraw-Hill building.

So I drove into Newburgh, parked at the Greyhound terminal just in time, and threaded my way to a seat near the back of the bus. Like the rest of the passengers, I was now deep in a routine, overlaid with an early morning haze that further obscured most of my senses. The day was grey, the terminal was grey, and the long interior of the bus was also mostly

grey. It wasn't until we were rolling past used car lots and dingy diners that I realized some of the grey was inside, suffusing everything with a dim dullness that seemed perfectly natural.

In the publisher's office I felt a little more relaxed than usual, in what might well have been an awkward confrontation with the author. Steve and I settled enthusiastically on a restructuring plan for the manuscript, but it was accepted only grudgingly by Horatio Eldover, who was understandably miffed at his work being revised by a third party. Nevertheless, I looked forward to getting it finished over the next several weeks in Canterbury.

After Eldover's grumbling departure, Steve and I lunched at one of our favorite restaurants, and I strolled back to the Port Authority terminal under a sunny sky. I should have felt pretty good, but when I was seated on the 2:40 back to Newburgh, I noticed that I wasn't pleased by the publisher's approval of my work plan, or satisfied by the fine meal on his nickel, or attracted to the crisp sun-drenched winter's day outside. Nor was I feeling much empathy for Eldover's wounded pride. There was a patina of city grime on the bus window, and that seemed as interesting as anything else.

The bus hummed and jounced, and the diesel engine whined through endless gear changes up along the edge of New Jersey, but instead of dozing, I stared at the seat-back in front of me, fixating on the stained texture of its dark nylon webbing, while drab gas stations and small factories blurred past in the fading afternoon light.

I performed all my restructuring and editing at home, returning to the city every few weeks to confer with Steve and reassure him that the project was on track. In Canterbury, I had ordered a single-spaced typescript with narrow margins, which brought Eldover's original reams down to a more manageable 600 pages. The book was then flayed into strips of manuscript, paragraph by paragraph, and laid out on the dining room table to be rearranged and scotch-taped back together. The process went forward smoothly, but slowly, and my estimate of a few weeks' work stretched into a few months.

In those days, doing everything by hand was the only way, and mechanically reorganizing a manuscript seemed a perfectly natural process, thoughtful, even contemplative. Seeing such a large book laid bare as a set of geographical regions on the big oak table afforded insights

into the content that would have been impossible for the author. Standing over the disintegrated text, my hands worked independently of my mind, snipping fragments apart, taping them back together in new sequences, rearranging blocks and layers of paper, moving townships and counties of content this way and that, while my understanding of the book and its subject matter grew.

Increasingly the map on the dining room table began to reflect not just Eldover's book, but Eldover himself. This wholesale violation of his original creation revealed all the hidden inconsistencies in his thinking, his preferences, and his distaste for certain ideas. It wasn't surprising that this would make him uncomfortable, laying open so many idiosyncrasies in his life's work, for anyone to see.

I didn't encounter Horatio Eldover again until late April, months after starting the project. On the bus to the city, I held the first several chapters in a box on my lap, but felt no inclination to give them one last read-through. This was a much improved manuscript, and I no longer thought about Eldover's feelings. He'd been paid for a job of work, and he had delivered a decent product, and now he was out of the picture. It was not at all clear why Steve wanted him to attend any of our editorial meetings, but I really couldn't have cared less.

Steve's office overlooked mid-town from 45 stories up, and I was gazing at the city when Eldover came in and stood by the conference table while a stranger in a three-piece suit walked in behind him and introduced himself as "Mr. Eldover's attorney." Steve appeared surprised, but shook the man's hand and motioned him to join us. I went to my seat and declined the stranger's handshake.

The meeting never came close to editorial matters. Eldover fidgeted and perspired while his lawyer stated their claim that the original author could stop publication of the book because his text had been re-used by a third party and the publisher hadn't bought the right to do that. Steve looked at me, but I had nothing to say. I'm not a lawyer. The company lawyer was summoned, and the two attorneys traded technical assertions for over an hour. I gazed out the window, but I wasn't close enough to see down to the street. When they left, Steve shrugged and sighed, and suggested we go for a drink.

We sat in a nearby tavern for twenty minutes or so, mainly avoiding the intensity of Eldover's unexpected antagonism, which I knew would likely create problems for the company. Steve tried to laugh about spring weather and some special feeling he had about Manhattan in the spring, but I could see he was worried. I used to like springtime in the city myself, but this year it didn't seem notable. Mainly I was bored, and I wanted to get back to Canterbury.

I often walk alone down the overgrown driveway to the site of the missing mansion to gaze at the Hudson. The old foundation is only a few hundred yards beyond the castle, but the mansion's view to the North can be magnificent. The abrupt drop and the distant sweep of the river could pull me out of any mindset, as if I were standing on the edge of a different world. I would eventually have to consciously tear my attention off the tiny buildings of Beacon across the river, and the bridge to Newburgh, and the tiny boats and barges in the water.

After the unproductive meeting with the lawyers, I went straight to the overlook and stared out at the river. The spring growth was just beginning to fill in the trees, but the greenery this spring was muted and dull. My mind was stuck on the half-done maze of paragraphs on the dining room table, and nature wasn't competing very effectively.

When I returned to the vast tangle of manuscript fragments, however, my brain was fresh and clear, and the work drew me in.

Within another month I had the tattered manuscript all taped up in a stack of scraps, ready for the typist in town. A week later, I resettled in my office to edit and revise the book one last time. The prose was tight now, and the structure was clear on several levels. Nothing was left out. The original material was now presented in an orderly and predictable manner. After a few more weeks of editing and small adjustments, I was done with the thing. I called Steve in New York and we set up a meeting.

As the bus to Manhattan roared and whined down Route 17 and through the Lincoln Tunnel to Port Authority, not a single thought entered my head. The world outside the bus windows was as featureless as the tiled walls of the tunnel. The dingy city terminal building was equally blank. I walked to the publisher's building and rode the elevator to the 45th floor.

I was early. Steve was waiting in his office. Two company lawyers were already at the conference table. Eldover and his attorney arrived

a few minutes late. Steve had put a thick copy of the latest typescript at each person's seat. I could see that Eldover was upset. He was shaking and refused to look up from the stack of pages in front of him.

The lawyers fenced and parried. Eventually they agreed that the publisher held all rights to do anything at all with the manuscript. Eldover pressed his lips together as the final pronouncements were made. I didn't care one way or the other. Interestingly, I also felt immune to Eldover's deep discomfort, but I'm not sure why I found that to be interesting.

At the end of the meeting, Steve's lawyers passed around a quit-claim document that Eldover had to sign, agreeing not to raise these objections ever again. He looked at his lawyer and frowned, and the lawyer nodded a few times. With an audible groan, Eldover signed the quit-claim in a trembling scrawl. From where I was sitting it looked like the signature of a palsied octogenarian.

Eldover and the lawyers left. Steve was obviously relieved. None of this had meant anything to me. It was just procedures. You write, someone revises, people sign things, something does or doesn't get printed, life goes on. Steve asked if I wanted to get a drink to celebrate, but I said no. Time for the bus back up state.

I walked across 49th Street to 8th Avenue and headed down toward Port Authority. Somewhere around 44th, Eldover caught up with me. He crowded me into an alley and blocked my way. He'd been waiting for me. He shouted. There were foam flecks in the corners of his mouth. I didn't say anything because there still weren't any thoughts in my head. Besides, what do you say to someone?

Eldover pulled a pistol out of his windbreaker and waved it at me, still shouting. I was carrying the latest revision of his book in a box, so I pushed him backwards into the alley and hit him in the head with it. He fell down and dropped the gun. It looked like a toy gun, but I didn't check. I bent down and hit him a couple more times. Then I went on down to the bus terminal and took the 2:40 Short Line to Newburgh. The bus was becoming something of a routine.

Steve phoned me a few revisions as they trickled in from reviewers. His copy editor called now and then with minor adjustments and inconsistencies. There were some delays with the PR campaign. Steve held back going into print until everything was ready. By the time August ended,

September began to seem a bit more interesting. The sun was brighter, and the birds were back. I wondered where they had been all summer.

I kept the manuscript up to date over the next few weeks, and by October everybody was very pleased with it, and I was feeling pretty good myself. Later in October Steve called and said it was time to hit the presses, and I have to admit I did feel a little thrill that this thing was finally going to see the light of day. It can bring a good warm burst in your chest when something gets finished and it's all due to your own efforts.

It was late in the season now, but the trees had become unusually vibrant in recent weeks before the leaves began to fall. I felt a twinge of sadness as the day-glo yellows and orange disappeared, but the air was so sweetly fragrant I just enjoyed the change. The smells of autumn were moist and fertile, and it was obvious next spring would be full of that special bright iridescent green one sees when the leaves return. I had the typist prepare one more final copy and I shipped it off to Steve.

My head was filling up with ideas for another book, one of my own, of course, and it was a relief to be back onto projects that weren't someone else's. I was thinking about writing a history of the Hudson highlands, or perhaps a study of the geology of the river itself, as I gathered up the last bits of the Eldover project and packed them away in my office closet. I put the final version on a high bookshelf where I could see it; later, the first edition would stand next to it. One unedited copy of the retyped original manuscript remained in a cardboard box, but I wasn't sure what to do with it.

I carried it down the long driveway at the castle, toward the invisible mansion, the leaping off place. The autumn foliage was sparse but the colors of fall, where leaves still remained, had acquired the most tantalizing subtle hues. Bushes had become intricate clumps of twigs, and trees were no more than wiry limbs reaching hopefully into a delicately shaded sky. The Hudson River was streaked with iridescent silver in the afternoon light, and the nearby hills were covered with grey-brown webs of bare branches, hovering over their dark trunks like smoke.

I stood for several minutes staring out over the river, reveling in the chilly breeze that crept through my clothing and ruffled my hair. The exuberance of fall had gone, but inside, the lights were all back on. Things

were beginning to happen, moving out into the flow of life, the cycles and crests of creative emotional weather.

Standing like a discus thrower, I spun round and hurled the old manuscript box at the river. I was done with it. The box stayed closed at first, turning end over end against the sky, and then suddenly blew open, fluttering 600 sheets of paper down among the barren trees like one last grimace of winter.

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