

Dann Anthony Maurno

2,387 Words

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SOMETHING REAL FINE

by

Dann Anthony Maurno

[A letter from Thomas Smolley to his brother James, August 2, 1851; from Fort Hall, Idaho to Salem, Massachusetts.]

Brother James

I write to you from a place called Fort Hall in Idaho, which is not an army fort at all. It is a town with walls like Jamestown and Plymouth. The reason for them walls is the same and that is Indians and there is no peace now. I'll sleep in my wagon for there are no rooms to be let here. The portugee fellow I'm rolling with got himself arrested, the dunderhead. I can wait two days to move on or pay his fine but I won't, so I am drinking as much whiskey as I can pour down my neck in two days. I am content, for now.

Forgive me not writing for so long, it has been weeks since we struck a town. I am of course eager for you and Susan and the children to come west when you are ready, but I want you to know what is out here so as you can think it through yourself. It is not the same as the east James, nothing like the east.

Me being a sailor the first thing I noticed is what is not there, and that is water. Hell I always complained I had my fill of the sea and wisht my journeys ended but I always signed onto another packet did I not? And taverns aplenty in Salem but still I drug myself to the wharf and drunk with sailors. Had I to do it over, I would have sailed out on the Talma around Cape Horn and gone west more direct.

On the trail you carry barrels of water and we have four strapt to our wagon and they are never full. I make sure I drink two cups a day. I tell the people in my train you must drink! But water is precious and they are afraid of drinking it all and folks will go days without tapping their barrels. There are them dunderheads is found dead of thirst with a full canteen who was saving it. Dunderheads. If you come then leave off a sack of beans and carry more water and for God's sake drink it.

When you make your way, you will come across water holes, but do not run like a dunderhead to a water hole and dip your mouth to it. Look first to see if there are dead birds and coyote about and let your mule or dog drink first. There are them who poison water holes behind them and burn the bridges and ferries behind them. There is gold and land to be had and they mean to have all of it. It is not civil out here like Salem, not even like the sea. Everyone thinks he owns the west. The rich think the land belongs to him, the poor says the rich don't know how to make a homestead. The god fearing thinks he owns it, and the heathen like the chinee figures you do not want me east so I went west why do you not go back?

Willett is our wagon master and he calls the west a frontier. I tell him I was a sailor and sailed out of Massachusetts, he tells me that the east and the sea was both frontiers once. But now the east is all sorted out and civil with churches and schools and water pumps and sailing is all organized along what Willett calls a Higher Arky. They are frontiers no more and I should be grateful to be a pilgrim on this new one.

An english in our train figures that Washington will move west. Washington was built among farms

and seaports he says, where rich merchanting was. But the west is richer now and Washington will follow the wealth. He talks smartish like the englishes on board always did and like your boss Treewell at the custom house. This english talks to the rest of us like pups because his country is old. Willett told him to shut his cake hole. I wanted to beat the english and asked Willett for permission he being wagon master. You go right ahead young fellow, he told me, but go easy them english are soft. They are lorded over by a little fat lady name Victoria but our presidents grew up on farms and fought Mexicans and such.

One thing not so different is from Salem is all the accidents you hear. I drunk at a saloon today and heard French accidents and chinee accidents and dago accidents from Italy, and god help us Irish accidents. But they do not co-operate the way we do shipboard, not even the way we do in Salem. We do not care in Salem if our butcher is a polak and our tailor is a chinee and our midwife is a dago. They are not our friends hell no but they earn their keep. We don't care aboardship if a fellow is a polak long as he keeps his watch and mends his sail or does what he's obliged. Out here is a Higher Arky and they care a good deal. We have no chinee in our train, Willett will not allow them. We got one Irish but he convinced Willett he was a scot. Willett thinks the west belongs to the Godfearing and he will not make truck with heathen of any kind or mackerel snapping catholics neither. He tolerates that portugee because he can shoot. Willett does not poison water holes or burn ferries but he is a hard man.

Two kinds that are not here are them Africans and them islanders like the feejee. I suppose most of them Africans aren't free to go as they please and maybe them feejees can't bear to leave the water to what they're born.

I am a kind of feejee I figure. Never mind I got white skin and long pants and wear shoes, I am feejee, born to water and meant to die there. Sure I grew fair sick of the sea for real and sure one Christmas shipboard is like the one before and one fight with a portugee is like the next. Sure there is adventure to be found out here, as we do not know what will be one day to next, will it be a good fortune like a herd of bison to eat? Or a bad one like the Dakota Sioux war party? Will Willett decide we are low on rations and declare only the men can eat they need the strength? He has done so twice and some families left the train. I suppose that is adventure. But there is no water. I will sail out when I reach San Francisco rather than make a stead.

So James I will not be able to make a stead to welcome you and Susan and your young as I promised. But you do not want to come to San Francisco anyhow. You may want to stop instead in a more civil place like Parfitt Nevada which an army captain tells me is civil plenty with a school and such. See I read an Agony Aunt in a journal called the Ladies Intelligencer & Literary Portfolio. I was some kind of bored to read such a thing. It seems San Francisco is a port town too but a young one and without its civil parts like Salem. I enclose that page here and will let you read.

“Dearest Auntie:

“I have received and accepted a proposal of marriage from (whom I will call Paul), who is ambitious of fastidious moral rectitude. Before I could purchase even a hatpin for my trousseau, he informed me that we leave Sandusky to travel west, the day after our wedding!

“This is not my desire, but it is strongly his. My parents are divided on the matter, my father feeling that the West holds limitless opportunity for a young family, my mother fearing she shall never see her daughter or grandchildren. She weeps without surcease, talking of Indians, emigrants, &cetera.

“I admire Paul without end, but I had no idea the trip to that end would be the wagon trail! What am I to do?

“Yours with affection,

“Miss Misery”

“Dearest Misery:

“My thanks for your affection, and good wishes to you in return.

“If you had any conditions upon your love for ‘Paul,’ then you must needs have made them clear, prior to accepting his offer of marriage. A man is by nature ambitious and adventurous.

“By ‘West,’ does he intend to bring you to Oregon, to make a homestead? Is there worship of your faith, and the company of women where he will take you? Then you are promised a quiet and a rewarding marriage.

“By contrast, does he intend to take you to San Francisco? Then, dearest Misery, exercise your right to break your engagement without explanation. To put it as mildly as I am able, San Francisco is a sprawling place, wherein the men outnumber the women nearly one hundred fold. What women there are are best categorized as ‘camp followers,’ often Chinese and Mexican emigrants, as the rumors go.

“A lady who goes willingly to San Francisco risks being tarred with that brush, for fair or for no. If misfortune should befall your Paul, then you must fend for yourself on the Barbary Coast of San Francisco, where you will find only the lowest of options of survival.

“That is my advice Misery Dearest. If you are forced to break your engagement then, if Paul is the gentleman you describe, he will accept the blame on manly shoulders.

“Yours with kindest wishes,

“Auntie.”

See how you cannot take Susan there and your Davey and Sharon . Susan may tell you a port town like Salem is not suited to women, but Susan lives respectable and keeps a fine home and none would call her a

camp follower or any such ugly name.

If you come you will be protecting your Susan and your Davey and Sharon, always. You will have no house to shut them up in. I seen how you treat them James. When the ships come you hold your Susan close by in the house. When gales come terrible you gather your kin around the hearth and throw rugs around them and over their legs and you stoke the hearth and Susan boils tea with water from that pump out back your house. Susan tells your Davey to stay away from the dock else he will hear ungodliness from people like his uncle Thomas. Out here is no godliness. If a fellow shoots good we can't trouble ourself about his godliness, long as he calls himself protestant and is not black or yellow.

I recall last Christmas just before I set out, how of a Saturday with Davey and Sharon abed you drug in that bath and boiled water on the hearth for your Susan and of course ast me to leave for the night. I am of course not so particular about bathing, but a good woman like your Susan will never go to worship of a Sunday with a week of dirt on her, and that I admire. Know that your Susan will never have her bath out here, and that is rough on women. We men can go months without a bath, sailors in particular. We suffer that Christ-awful itch about the arse and forget we smell like piss because so do everyone on our watch. One fellow in our train promised his wife a bath in Fort Hall where they got bath houses with soap and all, but he tells me the water she got into was cold and filthy already from the ten who was there before her one of them a skinner and two of them whores and she smelt no better than before. If you come James, tell your Susan all of it and show her the Intelligencer so she knows aforehand.

Or stay in Salem. I got wandering in me sure and always will. I know you envied me that and your Davey thinks his uncle Thomas is something marvelous. But James don't waste your time wishing for something else. Once you have it you will wish for that box of a house on Carlton Street with your Susan and Davey and Sharon shut up in it and safe. You will wish for your pay packet from the custom house and Susan will wish for soap and regular Sunday worship which is not much for a woman to ask, and Davey who complains loud about school will wish for it because there is none here.

See James, your kin do not want. That's as fine a thing as there is. That woman I told you about who took a dirty bath, she cries a lot but only when her man and her boys are not looking. But she has taken to butchering what meat the men bring to the train and takes in mending when we make camp. Them are fine things for that woman to do Thomas, and I suppose your Susan would be like her always making herself useful but I suppose too she would cry when you are not looking.

So stay home James. I did not set out to tell you that but am telling you now. You can go to your grave never having been on a frontier, most have not. Salem is no frontier anymore because someone else busted that earth for you and fought off them Wampanoag and you have the rewards of it and should be fair grateful. You don't need to bust earth James you need to take your Nancy to church in Boston just once like she always

wanted and buy Davey longer pants each year he grows. Then get him work at the custom house if he wants it or let him sail if he wants it. But don't think you haven't built nothing you have.

Your brother

Thomas

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