

The Dam.

“Ah, good morning, Sam. I hoped you’d get in early, and you’ve obliged.” Don stood smiling, looking over some topographic maps of a mountainous region in Northern California. Sam walked over, and the two shook hands, as was their daily custom. Sam asked Don what was happening, as Don seemed unusually excited today. Don laughed and then replied, “Yes, yes. I am excited, Sam. We got the contract to survey the new dam to be built in the Klamath Mountains by the Oregon border. It’s an exciting project and the newest dam to be built in a long time.”

The two men stood peering at the four topographic maps with their multi-colored contour lines. Sam and Don were highly experienced surveyors, having spent most of their adult lives as surveyors. Their primary love was working in wilderness areas, but the opportunities for that work had dwindled to nearly zero over the past two decades. But now, this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity had suddenly presented itself; they had bid on the project, and their bid had been chosen. Both men had high hopes that they would win the contract. After signing the various contracts several weeks ago, they finally received the official authorization to proceed.

The region for the new dam was an area of mountains named the Klamath Mountains. This area encompassed seven national forests, and the enormous mountain cluster consisted primarily of serpentinite and marble, some of the rocks dating back more than 500 million years. Their job was to travel to the region and survey the area to find the best location for the new dam. Also entailed in their scope of work was to investigate and mark out the best places for the roads necessary for the initial work and the secondary roads required to get to and then used to build the dam. Of course, the project would take several years, and the two men were excited to begin.

Though not exactly an excursion, the preliminary trip would be exciting for them. As the days passed and they honed in on the most likely places for the dam and the potential roads leading to it, they packed their large, four-wheel drive truck with everything they thought they would need for the initial, several-week-long trip. They would use the various roads already existing in the region, primarily logging roads. These roads were numerous, and while they did not precisely meet their end needs, they would undoubtedly suffice initially.

And so, finally, they were ready to depart. The truck also had a large trailer they would tow as the truck bed was too small for all their equipment, tents, chainsaws, gasoline, etc. The trailer had been modified; it was lifted higher than most trailers to allow it to travel off-road better.

This would enable them to get to offroad areas without getting stuck on fallen trees or the large rocks found offroad.

The two men set off and headed towards Beatty, which they had calculated was approximately an eight-hour drive. The town of Beatty is located at the junction of the Sycan and Sprague Rivers and east of Klamath Falls. The small mountain town of Beatty included many nearby mines, unspoiled timber stands, ranch lands, rustic campsites, and access to the area they were contracted to survey.

The two men knew from experience that many people would not welcome them and that some might be hostile toward them. The two men signified change, and in their case, significant change. If their initial surveying proved that the new dam, which was to be built to provide hydroelectric power to the national grid, was viable, not only would the new dam project bring hundreds of workers for several years, but it would also bring massive change to the area. The once naturally thriving and pristine ecological systems would be forever altered, and a magnificent mountain lake would be created in that forever-changed area. The dam would soon

allow the valley behind it to become an enormous lake, which would then become a major tourist attraction; homes would be built, new businesses would be started, schools would be needed, and the area, once so untouched and wild, would need to be tamed so people could live there. The two men had their focus on the job at hand- surveying the area along the upper regions of the Sycan River.

As they entered the small town of Beatty, they checked into the motel where they planned to stay that night. Later, they would eat dinner at a local restaurant and finally retire early as they wanted to leave at dawn the next day. They were both happy when they left Beatty the next morning in the half-light of early dawn. They knew they wouldn't return to civilization for several weeks and probably longer. Their drive was, at first, along paved roads, and after only a few hours, they turned onto the first dirt logging road and headed towards, and then, at times, along the wild running Sycan River. The topographic maps they used were mainly from satellite imagery and were very accurate. The men arrived at their first campsite, far away from others, surrounded by the quiet only wilderness areas can provide. The two men set up camp in a clearing they found, surrounded by one-hundred-and-fifty-foot pine trees, and, as the day began to darken, they made their dinner and talked about their plan for tomorrow. Inquisitive chipmunks seemed to be surveying the surveyors, and the appearance of the cute chipmunks made the two men smile.

The following day, the two men drove the truck, minus the trailer, as far as they could, and then they donned their backpacks and hiked further into the wilderness. They would survey new territory daily, always returning to their campsite at night.

One night, as they returned, they saw a Jeep parked at the far side of the clearing with a small camping trailer still attached. Two women waved at the two surveyors as the men passed the

Jeep and the camping trailer. The men drove their truck to their campsite, then walked about a hundred yards back to where the women stood waiting with smiles on all four faces. After introducing themselves, they all talked for several minutes before the men said they needed to go and prepare dinner and drink a beer or two. As the evening grew chilly, the men lit a fire in the fire ring they had created. The fire ring was about six feet in diameter, surrounded by boulders they had rolled into place, and then another six feet outside the circle of boulders was raked clean of anything that could burn. This made it safe to have an open fire, and after the men had eaten their dinner, the two women made their way over and asked if they could sit for a while. "Yes, of course," replied the two men in unison while grabbing camp chairs for the women to sit on. One of the women returned to their campsite and returned shortly with a bottle of wine and two glasses, and the four toasted each other, the women with their wine and the men with their beers. The clink of cans and glasses made them all smile, and they began getting acquainted. As they talked, they could faintly hear the mighty Sycan as it first turned and then flowed over a cliff, creating a waterfall and a swimming hole some two hundred yards from their campsite. As they each looked up, the stars seemed to form a carpet of diamonds above them, so tightly were the stars packed together. The stars shone much like fine diamonds, too, with multi-colors that emanate from within and which the four people sometimes squinted to see more clearly. The many falling stars brought loud oohs and ahhs from them all. Too soon, it seemed the women departed for the night, and the two men soon retired to their separate tents for a well-earned night's sleep.

The next several days seemed to pass quickly, and the four people would gather after dinner and hang out together each evening. The women learned why the men were there, and the men came

to know that the two women were lifelong friends who had finally fulfilled a lifelong wish to camp in these mountains and along this river.

This evening, though, the women had a surprise for the men, and they hurried over to tell the men they had made them dinner and to come over when they were ready. The two men decided to walk to the swimming hole and clean up before dinner. The women shyly passed on the invitation to join them, and about forty-five minutes later, the men returned with their hair still wet from swimming. After a tasty dinner of trout cooked over an open fire, which the two women had caught that morning, along with a salad of lettuce, tomatoes, and cucumbers, they walked back, and the men lit a fire for them to relax by.

Oddly enough, the four people were all about the same age and single for various reasons. The friendship between them had become easy and was one of familiarity by now, so it wasn't shocking to any of them when one of the women and Don said they were going to walk over to the other campsite. Sam and the second woman remained by the campfire, and their conversation became more private and personal. Don and his friend retired to her tent for the night, and soon Sam and his friend retired to Sam's tent. Both couples were left alone and to do whatever couples do when left alone. The stars still shone brightly in the night sky, the river flowed as it had for centuries, and the two couples became acquainted as they had never done before.

Another week passed, and the day came for the two women to depart. Their departure was made with love and care; contact details were taken all around, and they were pleasantly surprised to learn how close they would be once the men returned home. The women departed, and the men continued surveying the area. When they returned that evening, it was just their trailer, two tents, and a large fire ring that greeted them.

The two surveyors kept working; they had surveyed and staked out the main road into the valley where the dam would be built. Not only were the road's boundaries neatly staked out, but so were all the trees painted with big red X's to mark which needed to be felled, and those on the sidelines, which would stay, for now, were marked with a big white X. As the two men began packing their gear, they stopped to look around, as this place would soon never be the same, except for the canopy of the night's stars. Still, even that would be diminished by the pollution from the lights running on generators that all the new construction workers would bring with them as the taming of this area got underway in earnest.

After spending weeks in the wilderness, the two men began the long drive home. In many ways, this wilderness allowed them to relax on a level rarely achieved in the city where they lived.

There were few people in the area where they stayed, no emergency sirens, rarely other people, and no crowds or road rage. Their bodies and minds relaxed on levels and at depths they weren't even conscious of, but they were aware of the overall effect of having been in the wilderness for so long. The two men contacted the woman they had met, and their lives quickly became busy again. The two men would have numerous video conference calls and in-person meetings with the other principals in the dam project as the plans were finalized and then implemented to proceed with the project.

Sometimes, the men and their female friends would double-date; at other times, they wouldn't, and both relationships were deepening and becoming permanent. The men often talked about their relationships, and each man appeared happy with their progress.

The biggest question that seemed to be in all their minds and which they all talked openly about, both together and as couples, was the question of damming a wild, untamed river. The dam would forever damage, change, or destroy all the once-thriving ecological systems that had

thrived since the beginning of the river. Still, the dam would also create electric power, which is necessary and would create a pristine mountain lake. None of the four were against the project, yet all four were cognizant of the permanent change this project would cause. Occasionally, they reminisced about their time there and would look at the photos they each had taken. As the men went back and forth to do more surveying and stake out more access roads, rest areas, and even mountain areas that needed to be dynamited to make way for the road that needed to pass through, they watched the area change dramatically. The work was well underway by now, and there was rarely any quiet in the mountains anymore from the excavators, the automated tree-cutting machines, to the massive, chipper shredders, to the enormous bulldozers removing the tree stumps, and then finally to the gas generators providing electricity at the various campsites that were now dotted for miles near the once serene camp they had found in a clearing, surrounded by one-hundred-and-fifty-foot pine trees.

The upper Sycan would be mostly unaffected by the dam, and eventually, the lower Sycan would become less affected. The dam engineers implemented a spillway plan to direct part of the river into the dam yet keep an adequate flow to the Sycan. The idea was to mitigate damage caused by a decrease in the water below the dam during the time it would take for the dam to fill and for the time it would take to start producing electric power. Once the turbines began spinning from the water behind the dam, that water would flow into the Sycan. The plan was bold, and it was huge. The one construction idea that satisfied those opposed to the project was that the dam engineers would make permanent the flow control that directed water into the dam while ensuring an adequate flow to the Sycan River. This satisfied those who worried about a drought or a series of droughts.

One day, as the men were driving north again to spend several weeks surveying the actual placement of the dam itself, the two men discussed their relationships with the two women they had met and with whom they had been dating now for more than two years.

Sam began the conversation about his girlfriend by laughing out loud. It wasn't a mean or sarcastic laugh; it seemed to come from a happy place inside him. So delightful was the laughter that Don also laughed for no reason but to hear his friend's happiness.

This wasn't their first discussion about their relationships, yet it was their first in a while.

Sam said, "My time with Barbara has been so good. I often said I'd never love again and didn't for more than seventeen years. And even with Barbara, I resisted, kept my exit door unlocked, and checked to ensure it still worked several times."

The two men, friends their entire lives, smiled and laughed together. Sam continued, "It occurred to me that Barbara was much like the Sycan River in that she, too, had been flowing freely for years and years. And when I mentioned this to her, she suggested we were both like the river. And then we both agreed that you and Sheryl are the same since you've been flowing along your courses for as many years as we can remember." Sam looked at Don to see his reaction, and Don was smiling. The conversation went quiet as the truck and trailer headed north and east.

After several minutes without speaking, Don spoke. "You know, Sam, you've always been the more verbal of us two. You have a way with words that I don't. So, the interesting part of what you say is that I've felt what you say, but I could never put my feelings into words like you can."

Sam replied, "It's like the four of us were each related to the Sycan emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Our dams were when we formed relationships together, and personal spillways were also necessary to protect each of us from a lack of the freedom and wildness that we enjoyed and

would need to continue enjoying to sustain each of us as we entered our mutual relationships. Before,” Sam continued, “I had total control over how and where I flowed, to use the river analogy.” He laughed, and Don laughed, too. “But now, with Barbara and I living together, I don’t have that. Instead, I have her, and I’m happier and just as optimistic as ever. The metaphorical dam holds our relationship, and the spillway each of us has kept in our relationship affords us the part of the river we need for ourselves. It’s a perfect parallel because we both get how similar we are.”

Don was laughing a soft laugh and spoke even while he gently laughed. ”There are so many parallels,” he exclaimed. “While Sheryl and I haven’t moved in together, we still spend much time together. There are times when our happiness overflows, and then there are times of drought, but there has never been a time when the river has stopped flowing.”

At that, the conversation ceased, and the two men sat smiling, each with their thoughts. The sound of the truck’s tires on the roadway, the wind coming in Sam’s window, and whatever sounds were happening in each man’s mind were all that was happening.

Finally, Don spoke again, “And just as the dam will bring many changes, and will continue bringing many more changes to the area, so has our relationships with Barbara and Sheryl brought many changes to the four of us, and it will continue to bring much change.” Don laughed again, not a raucous laugh but a friendly, disarming laugh. “Not all the change has been easy for me, and probably not always easy for Sheryl. We’ve been single for over a decade and a half, and we got used to our solitary home lives. But we do get along very well; we are happier together than we are apart, and it’s nice to get away again into Northern California's wilds.” Both men gave out loud shouts of joy. Sam shouted, “Yes to days in the wilderness!” Don exclaimed, “And to some high-mountain fly fishing!”

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © October 8th, 2022