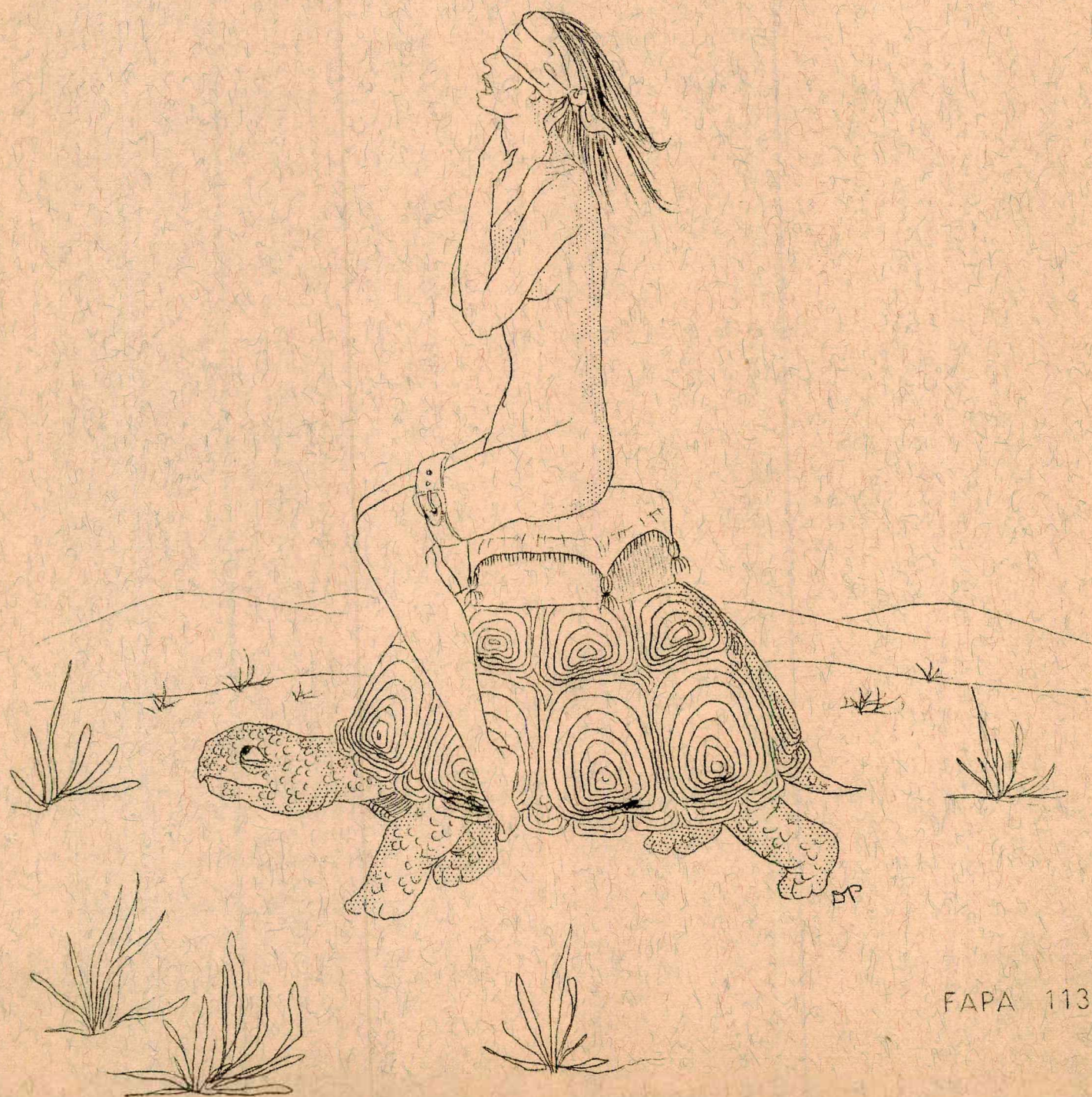


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# THE BRIGHT LAND PART A4

by Walt Willis

"But westward, look, the land is bright."

Monday, 10th September 1952 awoke at a time conditioned by that of mail deliveries 7000 miles away -- driven, you might say, from pillow to post. From the kitchen came the muffled sounds of Buz being dispatched to work. I have only a few days here with these fine people, I told myself sternly; could I possibly waste any of this precious time in mere torpor? Ignoring the affirmative reply from every fibre of my being, I got out of bed, dressed perfunctorily, and tottered into the kitchen, where I found a slightly out-of-focus Elinor. We carried on a conversation vaguely reminiscent of the attempts of two sailing ships in a dense fog trying to ascertain each other's intentions by indistinct signals. With great subtlety I eventually ascertained what she would normally be doing at this hour ("What would you normally be doing at this hour?" was the way I phrased the key question, and elicited the admission that she might get some more sleep. So I spoke to her as man to woman. "Let's go to bed," I said.

By the time Madeleine and I really got up it was half eleven, and Elinor was apparently out shopping. We made our own breakfast, after a struggle with the toaster which taxed all our feeble intellectual resources. This was the second automatic toaster we had encountered, but at Grennell's the problem had been comparatively simple. All you had to do was wander into the vicinity of the toaster with a piece of bread in your hand; the machine would wrest it from you and return it to human ken only when its transmogrification was complete. Our simple peasant minds accepted this in the same way that tribesmen in Central Asia accept the airplane but are bemused by the bicycle. The Busby toaster required a certain amount of programming, not to mention propitiation by burnt offerings.

It was raining in the afternoon, in a nice homely way, and it seemed as good a time as any to visit the World's Fair. Elinor had a cold, so she drove us to the entrance and deposited us there with her blessing and a sheaf of left-over tickets.

International Exhibitions remind me of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. When Lenin was asked what mandate he had from the Russian people to accept such humiliating terms, he said, wryly, that they had voted for peace with their feet. The bigger the Exhibition, the more varied and irresistible its attractions, the more the feet revolt against it, and at the end they carry the day by refusing to carry you. Even now there is such a cloud of fatigue in that corridor of my memory that I can't believe there would be much of interest in it to you. Except possibly the still-vivid recollection of seeing at the exit from the US Science Pavilion, in great gold letters on the wall, a quotation from a HYPHEN subscriber. Unaccountably they failed to mention this fact, mentioning just the name, Robert Conquest -- presuming no doubt that his chief claim to immortality lies in his poetry and not in his letters of comment on HYPHEN. Admittedly he hasn't written many of the latter lately,



his subscription having lapsed, but let that be a warning to you. Let your HYPHEN sub lapse, and you may find yourself reduced to writing on walls in Washington.

What else can I remember that would be tired and frustrated enough to convey my feetal memories of the World's Fair. Elvis Presley and Arnold Palmer...I mean Arnold Palmer and Elvis Presley...were there somewhere, but we didn't see them. Madeleine was given a demonstration of a voting machine and it didn't work, shaking our faith in the Western Alliance. We didn't climb the Space Needle because you had to stand in line. We saw a fabulous collection of furs, or so Madeleine says. Personally, I hate to contemplate the suffering of the poor dumb creatures who are skinned to provide these luxuries...namely men. And we starved to death in the Food Circus.

This last came about because we had been invited out to dinner by Sandy and Joy Sanderson, who were in Seattle at the time. The tragic circumstances of the break-up in Inchmery Fandom were still fresh in our minds, then, and although we liked the Sandersons as much as we always had, we felt sympathetic enough toward Vince Clarke's side of the affair to feel that if the Sandersons wanted to stand us an expensive meal we would jolly well get their money's worth. We must, I told Madeleine, Eat For Vince. Just call us bloody pro-Vincials.

But since we had had nothing to eat since morning, we began to get very hungry, and late afternoon found us drawn to the Food Circus, a huge arena full of stalls selling food from all parts of the world. In our famished state the odours were maddening, and it was agony to choose something that wouldn't spoil our appetites. I hesitated among so many things that I don't remember anything about what I actually had except that I could have eaten lots more of it.

Fortunately the dinner was worth the wait. It was at the Hyatt House, site of the previous year's Convention. The food was good, the company congenial, and the service improbably excellent. Madeleine asked for Sauterne, and the waiter said regretfully that they didn't have any; a few minutes later a plane landed outside and the waiter scurried in with a bottle. Sandy said, "Well, thanks, but you shouldn't have gone to all that trouble."

Back home in the Busby bungalow we talked late again, drinking home brew.

Tuesday, 11th September: Next morning we slept even later, and felt even tireder when we got up. Obviously this sleep stuff was an addictive drug, and we were hooked. Elinor and Buz took us to the Volunteer Park, where, in the museum, I saw for the first time the three-dimensional cartoons in ivory called netsukes, and then for a stroll along the shore. It was very nice, even if it wasn't really the Pacific, and familiar yet strange, like the twin brother of an intimate friend. There were big wooden posts lying in the sand which Buz said had been carried there for some reason, and I said maybe they were tote 'em poles. Then we went along to the harbour where they had porpoises in small tanks, which we hated, and where they advertised oysters and clam chowder in earthy terms -- "Only one to a customer without your wife's written permission." We bought fish and chips and ate them



### THE BRIGHT LAND - 3 - - - -

at a wooden table in the open. It was all very pleasant, and like a glimpse into the almost unknown America of the last century, before the car homogenized it.

Next item in our leisurely agenda was a cruise round Puget Sound, but it was off or something, so we settled for a short trip round the harbour, with a guide explaining where all the ships were from and us looking for ones made by Harland and Wolff at home. He also explained very carefully to his passengers what tides were and how they behaved, which amused us islanders no end. At home children hear of the tide before they hear of the sea -- at least when I was young people in Northern Ireland called the edge of the sea the tide.

Somehow the whole day had drifted pleasantly away, and it was time to go to the Nameless meeting. It was at Wally's house, in a maze of dirt roads. We were taken to marvel at the stump in the basement and the antique Thatcher furnace, which had something wrong with its pipes. ...ducts disease, I suggested... and then everyone sat round in the big low livingroom and talked. In format it was rather like a meeting of Irish Fandom, but more fragmentary: there had been some talk of me writing up the minutes instead of Wally, and I was glad to see he didn't take it seriously. Later Wally showed slides of the Convention, and Wally Gonser cut Paul Stanbery's hair in the kitchen. We gave the shorn Paul a lift home at the end. He seemed a very likeable young man, reminiscent of the best products of the English public school system without the arrogance, and without the slightest real evidence I was quite prepared to accept that he might turn out to be a genius.

Wednesday, 12th September: We were up at the crack of 9:40, very drowsy and in desperate need of a cup of tea. Madeleine stumbled into the kitchen, the kettle beckoning her like a Holy Grail, and inaugurated the life-giving ritual. Eventually the kettle boiled, and with shaking hands she infused the magic potion. She had just finished pouring in the boiling water and was bearing the teapot in triumph to the table when it disintegrated in her hand and shattered on the floor. She stood among the shards with a dazed expression on her face, in a little cloud of steam.

Buz had just appeared, making a bee-line for the pot Elinor had left on the stove, and leaving no doubt as to his intentions ("If that isn't coffee I'll kill myself.") He explained it was all his fault: the handle of that teapot had come off before, and he had stuck it on again, with epoxy resin glue. It must be no good. "The great Teapot Doom Scandal," I said, with a grasp of lesser known American history which even at the time I felt to be remarkable in the circumstances. Elinor, examining her kitchen floor, pointed out we could tell all our fortunes at once. When Madeleine pointed out that all the catastrophes, like the Towell rail incident and being bitten by a mosquito yesterday and now this, were happening to her this time instead of me, Buz said it must have been epoxy resin glue he mended the teapot with. Feeling somewhat weak at this point for some reason, I suggested Madeleine find another teapot and try again. "That's right," said Buz, "send 'em up again right away."

This was the day of the Great Mountain Hike, and soon our native guide Burnett Toskey arrived, and we were bowling along the road by



which we had first come to Seattle, towards the Snoqualmie Pass. Having parked the car, we distributed the loads of food and cameras and plunged into the primaeval wilderness. There was a very well defined path through it, with every now and then little direction signs and notices identifying types of trees. The combination of wildness and civilisation seemed very strange to us. The path, or trail as it was called, led up the slope in long zig-zags. After the fourth or fifth abrupt change of direction I realised with a blinding flash of illumination the real meaning of the word "switchback." The trek was curiously tiring, and I think one reason for this may have been the fact that there was nothing to see but the dense trees, so that there was no distraction from one's physical sensations, and no excuse to stop every now and then to admire the view. It was like being in a very healthy subway.

But after a few hundred feet we arrived at the clearing for the railway line, and I thought maybe the American style had its points. All the stored-up impact of the last half-hour burst on one at once -- the huge mountains across the valley, and countless more beyond them, everything on a tremendous scale.

After some redistribution of loads, we entered the subway again and toiled back and forth for a long time, but eventually the trail levelled out, and it became just a pleasant walk. And at last we came out from the trees to find a little jewel of a lake, blue and calm among wooded slopes, as silent as if its beauty had been untouched since the creation of the world. My feeling that we were really the first human beings to see it was not entirely dispelled by the presence of public toilets, picnic tables, and discarded beer cans. American scenery can take a lot of punishment.

It was called Lake Annette, Toskey said. We thanked him for it and strolled about for a while in admiration, then, humanity being what it is, began to feel hungry. While we were eating, Madeleine saw a chipmunk, which would have made everyone's day if it hadn't been made already. It seemed nearly as interested in her as she in it, and ate some of her sandwich. There was plenty for it, despite the gloomy prognostications of the women that they hadn't brought enough. There is always too much food at picnics. I think it must be some sort of strange Law of Nature, because it happens to everyone. Why, I remember reading of a picnic given by a very famous person indeed. There were five thousand guests and he only brought five loaves and two fishes, and still there was stuff left over.

We stayed at the lake as long as we could, and then started the trek down. I found it harder than going up, but Madeleine ran ahead as she always does going down mountains. She thinks of herself as a mountain goat, but I always feel more like one of the Gaderene swine.

There was a waffle party that evening at the Pfeiffers. There we had our first waffle and our second meeting with Seattle Fandom. First impressions confirmed were that they were a very likeable lot, but very heterogenous. So this, I thought, is what Irish Fandom might have been like in another probability world in which we had constituted ourselves as an open club. There was a strange variety of conversations going on, from light banter to intellectual battle. Pournelle and Tapscott, for instance, were arguing about politics, and putting each other down with an admirable kind of cold politeness unknown in Ireland, of which I can



