

SANDY'S BLUE NOTE

The sudden death of Alexander "Sandy" Frazier, of a cerebral hemorrhage at sixty-five, coincided all too neatly with the publication of his memoir, *Chicken With a Camera*, covering his forty years of wilderness photography. I received his book, and the assignment to review it, only two days before his blood stopped pumping. What follows may or may not be for publication.

First, an acknowledgement: the young woman in the photo facing page 192 is in fact your correspondent, although at the age of twenty-five I was not yet using my tripartite name. Jonie Jones they called me, until Sandy Fraser learned my famous middle moniker and convinced me to assume it in my writing. When this photograph was taken, I had not written anything except my masters' thesis on the sauce pans of the California desert and, once or twice, the word "Mrs. Sandy Frazier" (crossed out) and "Joan Jones Fraser" (allowed to remain) in the margins of my notebooks.

A young woman with platinum pigtails, in cutoff shorts and halter top. On her feet are massive hiking waffle-stompers and ragg socks. She is squatting, her whole pack its own cliff looming over her head, one freckled leg dangling over a ravine. Between vertical walls water tumbles and churn, an audible memory to this day as I gaze upon the silent image.

"Years before she won fame for 'My Tent is the Sky,' environmental essayist Joan Muir Jones joined me on a weeklong stay in the southern Sierras, July – August, 1974."

He was allergic, acrophobic, possessed of an unusual susceptibility to poison oak and a digestion of such delicacy as to suggest the inner workings of a harpsichord. He chain-smoked cigarettes, popped pills, snacked night and day at the druggie buffet, and had a weakness for

tequila. Sniffling, coughing, itching, limping, Sandy Frazier still attained the farthest corners of the topo maps, to come back bearing the largesse of his undeveloped film. This should not be construed as an endorsement of his book.

"I tried to bring to my dealings with people what I found out there in the wild. Sincerity. Harmony. Integrity."

Baloney. His emotions were so shallow they could not float a canoe. Sandy Fraser lied, as easily as he took breath – more easily, considering his constitution. Underweight, concave of chest, myopic as a mole and twitchy as a rabbit, the blue-eyed Hoosier with the long Scots jaw was when I knew him and for some years after paradoxically as tempting to the human female as a quart of ice cream and no witnesses. I am beginning to find this task somewhat distasteful.

"Joanie! Lookit!"

Hand on my wrist, he drew me to the edge of the ridge. I cried out, clutched my pigtailed, reached for Sandy's trembling palm but missed as the pale blue rock and bluer ice of the Sierra Nevada massif loomed, impossible but real, from behind a wall of green. Sometimes out of the mass of pines (pinyon, sugar, Ponderosa), of firs (Douglas and white), of waffling aspen and incense cedars, rose the great round burrs of *Sequoia gigantea*, the sky-punching thrust of their short branches rising like a boxer's upraised arms atop maple-red trunks. I loved those trees. They were my kin, my arboreal siblings in the family of Earth.

Delirious with pleasure, I turned with love in my heart and my eyes upon my charming, wise, experienced, neurotic, irresistible lover and companion – and found him collapsed on his bony knees, facing away from the gorgeous view which after all he had come there to photograph. His camera bags lay in the dirt. His lank blonde and silver hair fell in a smooth

cascade over his face. In a rapid chattering voice as if freezing or feverish, Sandy Fraser rattled, “Acro – acro – phobia, that view, I can’t stand up, I can’t –”

I stood there quaking in my Vibram soles. All the polypropylene then in existence couldn't have wicked away my sudden sweat. "Sandy – Sandy, oh my God!" I sloughed off my pack, sprang to his side. “We’ve got to get you out of here.”

He shook off my caressing hand. Voice cracking, neck jerking, he gasped into the dust, "You and – what army, Joan?"

“San – dy!” His gentle witticisms in the face of death, or at least panic – what a hero! Still, although my joy in him floated me like helium, so that even as I feared for his life I was able to wonder with gratitude at the depth and power of my love for him, a certain practicality, inherited I don’t doubt from my prairie-crossing ancestors, shoved to the fore. “You can’t stay here. You need a doctor. Nearest hospital is Porterville, that’s ninety minutes from the car, which is – please, Sandy! Say something!”

He had rolled onto his back and lay there, eyes closed, hands and arms splayed at his side I embraced him, pressing my head to his chest. To my surprise, he gripped and lifted me, and in his grasp I saw his eyes were open wide, his cheeks were flushed, and he was grinning.

“Now where you do think you’re going?” His flat Midwestern intonations thrilled me at that moment beyond all sounds on earth.¹ “To the hospital? I don’t think so –”

¹ The Frazerian accent and inflection deserve their own exegesis, not least because (“becozz” in Frazierian) phonetic spellings weary me, and bore most readers, and may leave others feeling somehow offended. Therefore, whenever Sandy Frazier speaks, readers should *in their own minds* replace “I’ll” with “O’ll”, “well” with “wul,” “what” with “whut”, “to” with “t” and eliminate as a safe bet the final “d” in “and” and the final “g” in gerunds. “For you” should be rendered “Fir yew.” Frazierian drew as well from the slang of the late sixties and the vagueness of the stoner culture. For example, “She told him she was planning to leave him, and she gave her reasons,” would in Frazierian come out as, “She told him she was goin t split, and stuff –” Note the characteristic trail-off in lieu of a full stop, emblematic perhaps of the late photographer’s commitment phobia. Such glib summations, however, detract from the genuine scholarly impetus behind this footnote. They will be excised.

He sat up. I sat back, astounded. He yawned, shook his hair, motioned for the camera bags, wiped his glasses, and went to work. I swapped lenses, I fetched film, I glowed like a young galaxy at the knowledge that I was assisting this near-legendary lens god twelve years my senior. We had met in Pasadena, at a party given by two Sierra Clubbers whom we both despised for, I am sorry to report, shallow personal reasons (he smelled, she ranted). Sandy was the guest of honor. I was there because I'd volunteered three summers in a row to clear brush and repair trails in the aptly named Rattlesnake tract of the local San Gabriel mountains. I have no defense for what proceeded from our meeting, but I will name it: three weeks of fireworks and being joined at the hip. Then he disappeared for a month.

Then he called, inviting me “to the mountains, I mean it’s not far or anything, I just hate to go up there alone and I was kind of thinking about you,” and I accepted almost before he finished speaking, and certainly long before – years before – I considered the proximity of “hate to go there alone” to “thinking about you,” and the statement that made about our then-relationship. The sudden fright, now, of his ridgetop attack, his equally sudden and complete recovery, struck my rationalizing brain as a mystery that need not require explanation. As long as I could *be with* Sandy, this ersatz thinking went, no fear or hurt could master either one of us. That was my conclusion – the first time.

By the time eight days later, when we emerged onto pavement at Johnsondale, my conclusions were as fragmented as styrofoam ice chests in raven country. In that week he experienced four height-attacks, three rashes (one suppurating), acid indigestion from freeze-dried ice cream, dry heaves from unknown causes, micro-conflagrations caused by burning butts and dropped joints (the Sierras thank goodness were wet that year), and two smashed bottles of Hornitos, one my responsibility.

Exhausted, yet sleepless thanks to his drugged snores, I lay next to him and contemplated that old devil's difference between the artist and the human being. Women in the sciences, as I speak as one who crossed the prairie in that world, sometimes are a little slow, or late, in picking up what their sisters in the English or psychology departments seem to absorb without strain, during puberty – which even if it were true would not excuse my being the only one surprised when, two years later at an important showing of his photos on that hip strip of La Cienega more often reserved for the painters and sculptors, Sandy turned up with an African-Cuban girl maed Marisol, younger than me, with a better derriere. My feminism to that point may have been embryonic, but my successor in Sandy's bed didn't have so much as a zygote.

In *Chicken With a Camera*, Sandy Frazier reels off his autobiographical facts without elaboration and order. Thus in less than thirty pages, we get the Johnson, Indiana clapboard house, the blue spruce and the blue hydrangea next to the dark green shutters, the wide, white porch with its graceful hand-turnings, the echoing stairwell, the twin gabled rooms upstairs that belonged to young Alexander and his younger brother Tommy. We have Sandy at ten, hunched in the crotch of the Dutch elm outside his gable, fiddling with his birthday-present Brownie, working on what would be his prize-winning fifth grade photo essay, "How the Robin Builds Its Nest." Sandy received his prize on the children's ward: he had fractured his leg falling out of the elm when one of his subjects decided to dive-bomb the fledgling *paparazzo*. We have Sandy in shoulder pads, the top quarterback in his Pop Warner league, although his athletic talents paled next to bigger, beefier, healthier Tommy's, who had just secured a scholarship to State the night he got drunk, rolled his car, killed his girlfriend, and committed suicide in jail. We see Sandy the Weirdo start to emerge, the obsession with jazz, the trips up to Chicago to "see stuff" and "hear

people,” the progression from the Brownie to the temperamental Zeica, to the Nikolta and finally the Hassenfuss, the black-box gold standard still revered in our digital era.

He dropped out of college to backpack the Andes – in 1958.² From then on, luck and accident bookend his life. Take, for example, his early break into the hallowed, glossy pages of the NGS’ flagship magazine: Emerson Hull, observing from his helicopter the cordillera near Mt. Chimborazo signaled his pilot to stop, stop, there was a human being sprawled atop a glacier, a flat one fortunately for the author. When he realized his rescuer was the Society’s then-Governor General, Sandy Frazier from the stretcher where he lay with a broken femur and mild hypothermia erupted with, “No shit! Oh man, did I say that? Because I’ve got these, like these, *slides* – ” And he did, sealed in plastic, inside his sodden shirt. Emerson in sympathy with the deluded held one or two up to the sun, and inside of eight months the words, “With Photographs by Sandy Frazier” took pride of place within the yellow box.

A lucky accident, his friendships with more rugged mountaineers. Bryan “Bodacious” Mandelstam, the late and much-mourned Everest guide, ran into Sandy Frazier at Hull’s secretary’s sister-in-law’s son’s bar mitzvah. They recognized each other across an open bar, and far before the end of the evening Sandy and Bryan were passing a joint in the parking lot and discussing Bryan’s upcoming trek to K2 (while Sandy’s date, the secretary, fumed in the car alone). That was the luck; the accident occurred at Base Camp, a mere twenty thousand feet above sea level, when Sandy developed a cough that made photography, even tripod-assisted, an impossibility. The photograph is stillness frozen, but he could not sit still, when he was freezing. He cracked two ribs, before he let himself be airlifted to oxygen-rich safety. His five rolls of

² Another admission: I loved Sandy for his vintage, because he could remember ration cards, scrap-metal drives in his Radio Flyer, and the day Roosevelt died (Sandy was eight, bored and disgruntled, bouncing a pink rubber ball against the front porch steps for hours in the early April chill); and not least because at twenty-five I was sick unto death of my own generation and its overpublicized passage through time.

film, shot what-the-hell anyway, can't, won't, shouldn't be equalled, not now, not in the future. No more footnotes; see instead in this context Teddy Roosevelt's screed on the Grand Canyon.

Lucky, but hardly accidental, were his respectful, at-a-distance friendships with brave pioneering women. He spent three months with Emigda Potiphar, as every Canadian knows the former provincial beauty queen who scorned a modeling career to dress in skins and run with the caribou, and his documentation of her descent further and further into what she called "full assumption of nomadic ungulate behavior" provides the most engrossing reading in the book. Emigda traveled a dangerous trail, from wanting to observe the caribou, to the itch to be among the caribou, to quivering with desire to become a caribou herself. Some people are transgender; Emigda under the aurora revealed herself to bemused Sandy as "transspecies." Apparently the former Miss Saskatchewan consulted several specialists in hopes of growing horns. And a tail.

Sandy Frazier photographed Emigda on her last day as a human. She had been training her stomach to accept a diet composed solely of grasses and lichens, and although she was still ambulating on two legs, her back was hunched to the point of evoking winces of pain (from the onlooker, Sandy – she no longer spoke) and her forearms dangled less than two feet from the ground. She had taught her ears to twitch, and they vibrated this way and that on her head, which was shaved except for four brown strips running from forehead to nape. An hour later she was dead, dragged down by her borrowed hides midway across the Yukon River in full flood. Sandy photographed the swirling skins just as she disappeared.

When I read how they found him dead, in his bunk bed in his loft, the windows open and the stereo wafting "Kind of Blue" into the sunny downtown haze, I shuddered in not pain, but laughter, the laugh of rueful recognition. I never shared his taste for jazz (a hefty

understatement), but the mention boobytrapped me, detonating in my face a flash picture of Sandy as I loved him best, or better said at the height of my cathexis. I saw him, moving with his shuffling early-morning gait around the clutter and detritus and occasional huddles of gleaming technology among which he lived and worked, and those muted melodies picked up like sunlight the fall of his hair, the curve of his shoulder, the way he leaned his hip into the nearest wall or doorjamb, the pink lining of his eyelids. I heard, against those muted horns, his hacking cough, the whine in which he announced sudden headaches, the whirr and splatter of antacid tablets striking the bottom of his glass. From this, from the swish of a brush against drumskins, has emerged the following endorsement: when Sandy's blue note sounded, when that flattened third or seventh in his horoscopic scale – the note behind, beyond, above, his allergies and injuries, his fears and his indifference – whenever his blue note blatted or purred, he was a Belovéd worthy of the name. I cannot say he did not please me.

Buy the book. By all means, buy the book. Do not become enamored of the author, for he was a shameless liar and a two-faced cheat. Skilled as he was in outdoor orienteering, he was a man without a moral compass.

Sandy Frazier is dead, at sixty-five. I loved him as one loves the sky, and with as much hope of possession.

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