
THE WEB AND THE ROCK

THOMAS WOLFE

Thomas Wolfe

THE WEB
AND
THE ROCK

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By the Same Author

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LOOK HOMEWARD, ANGEL
OF TIME AND THE RIVER
FROM DEATH TO MORNING
THE STORY OF A NOVEL

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is about one man's discovery of life and of the world—discovery not in a sudden and explosive sense as when "a new planet swims into his ken," but discovery through a process of finding out, and finding out as a man has to find out, through error and through trial, through fantasy and illusion, through falsehood and his own foolishness, through being mistaken and wrong and an idiot and egotistical and aspiring and hopeful and believing and confused, and pretty much what every one of us is, and goes through, and finds out about, and becomes.

I hope that the protagonist will illustrate in his own experience every one of us—not merely the sensitive young fellow in conflict with his town, his family, the little world around him; not merely the sensitive young fellow in love, and so concerned with his little universe of love that he thinks it is the whole universe—but all of these things and much more. These things, while important, are subordinate to the plan of the book; being young and in love and in the city are only a part of the whole adventure of apprenticeship and discovery.

This novel, then, marks not only a turning away from the books I have written in the past, but a genuine spiritual and artistic change. It is the most objective novel that I have written. I have invented characters who are compacted from the whole amalgam and consonance of seeing, feeling, thinking, living, and knowing many people. I have sought, through free creation, a release of my inventive power.

Finally, the novel has in it, from first to last, a strong element of satiric exaggeration: not only because it belongs to the nature of the story—"the innocent man" discovering life—but because satiric exaggeration also belongs to the nature of life, and particularly American life.

THOMAS WOLFE

New York, May 1938

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Book I

THE WEB AND THE ROOT

Could I make tongue say more than tongue could utter! Could I make brain grasp more than brain could think! Could I weave into immortal denseness some small brede of words, pluck out of sunken depths the roots of living, some hundred thousand magic words that were as great as all my hunger, and hurl the sum of all my living out upon three hundred pages—then death could take my life, for I had lived it ere he took it: I had slain hunger, beaten death!

The Child Caliban

UP TO THE TIME GEORGE WEBBER'S FATHER DIED, THERE WERE SOME UN-forgiving souls in the town of Libya Hill who spoke of him as a man who not only had deserted his wife and child, but had consummated his iniquity by going off to live with another woman. In the main, those facts are correct. As to the construction that may be placed upon them, I can only say that I should prefer to leave the final judgment to God Almighty, or to those numerous deputies of His whom He has apparently appointed as His spokesmen on this earth. In Libya Hill there are quite a number of them, and I am willing to let them do the talking. For my own part, I can only say that the naked facts of John Webber's desertion are true enough, and that none of his friends ever attempted to deny them. Aside from that, it is worth noting that Mr. Webber had his friends.

John Webber was "a Northern man," of Pennsylvania Dutch extraction, who had come into Old Catawba back in 1881. He was a brick mason and general builder, and he had been brought to Libya Hill to take charge of the work on the new hotel which the Corcorans were putting up on Belmont Hill, in the center of the town. The Corcorans were rich people who had come into that section and bought up tracts of property and laid out plans for large enterprises, of which the hotel was the central one. The railroad was then being built and would soon be finished. And only a year or two before, George Willetts, the great Northern millionaire, had purchased thousands of acres of the mountain wilderness and had come down with his architects to project the creation of a great country estate that would have no equal in America. New people were coming to town all the time, new faces were being seen upon the streets. There was quite a general feeling in the air that great events were just around the corner, and that a bright destiny was in store for Libya Hill.

It was the time when they were just hatching from the shell, when the place was changing from a little isolated mountain village, lost to the world, with its few thousand native population, to a briskly-moving modern town, with railway connections to all parts, and with a growing population of wealthy people who had heard about the beauties of the setting and were coming there to live.

That was the time John Webber came to Libya Hill, and he stayed, and in a modest way he prospered. And he left his mark upon it. It was said of him that he found the place a little country village of clap-board houses and left it a thriving town of brick. That was the kind of man he was. He liked what was solid and enduring. When he was consulted for his opinion about some new building that was contemplated and was asked what material would be best to use, he would invariably answer, "Brick."

At first, the idea of using brick was a novel one in Libya Hill, and for a moment, while Mr. Webber waited stolidly, his questioner would be silent; then, rather doubtfully, as if he was not sure he had heard aright, he would say, "Brick?"

"Yes, sir," Mr. Webber would answer inflexibly, "Brick. It's not going to cost you so much more than lumber by the time you're done, and," he would say quietly, but with conviction, "it's the only way to build. You can't rot it out, you can't rattle it or shake it, you can't kick holes in it, it will keep you warm in Winter and cool in Summer, and fifty years from now, or a hundred for that matter, it will still be here. I don't like lumber," Mr. Webber would go on doggedly. "I don't like wooden houses. I come from Pennsylvania where they know how to build. Why," he would say, with one of his rare displays of boastfulness, "we've got stone barns up there that are built better and have lasted longer than any house you've got in this whole section of the country. In my opinion there are only two materials for a house—stone or brick. And if I had my way," he would add a trifle grimly, "that's how I'd build all of them."

But he did not always have his way. As time went on, the necessities of competition forced him to add a lumber yard to his brick yard, but that was only a grudging concession to the time and place. His real, his first, his deep, abiding love was brick.

And indeed, the very appearance of John Webber, in spite of physical peculiarities which struck one at first sight as strange, even a little startling, suggested qualities in him as solid and substantial as the

houses that he built. Although he was slightly above the average height, he gave the curious impression of being shorter than he was. This came from a variety of causes, chief of which was a somewhat "bowed" formation of his body. There was something almost simian in his short legs, bowed slightly outward, his large, flat-looking feet, the powerful, barrel-like torso, and the tremendous gorillalike length of his arms, whose huge paws dangled almost even with his knees. He had a thick, short neck that seemed to sink right down into the burly shoulders, and close sandy-reddish hair that grew down almost to the edges of the cheek bones and to just an inch or so above the eyes. He was getting bald even then, and there was a wide and hairless swathe right down the center of his skull. He had extremely thick and bushy eyebrows, and the trick of peering out from under them with the head out-thrust in an attitude of intensely still attentiveness. But one's first impression of a slightly simian likeness in the man was quickly forgotten as one came to know him. For when John Webber walked along the street in his suit of good black broadcloth, heavy and well-cut, the coat half cutaway, a stiff white shirt with starched cuffs, a wing collar with a cravat of black silk tied in a thick knot, and a remarkable-looking derby hat, pearl-grey in color and of a squarish cut, he looked the very symbol of solid, middle-class respectability.

And yet, to the surprised incredulity of the whole town, this man deserted his wife. As for the child, another construction can be put on that. The bare anatomy of the story runs as follows:

About 1885, John Webber met a young woman of Libya Hill named Amelia Joyner. She was the daughter of one Lafayette, or "Fate" Joyner, as he was called, who had come out of the hills of Zebulon County a year or two after the Civil War, bringing his family with him. John Webber married Amelia Joyner in 1885 or 1886. In the next fifteen years they had no children, until, in 1900, their son George was born. And about 1908, after their marriage had lasted more than twenty years, Webber left his wife. He had met, a year or two before, a young woman married to a man named Bartlett: the fact of their relationship had reached the proportions of an open scandal by 1908, when he left his wife, and after that he did not pretend to maintain any secrecy about the affair whatever. He was then a man in his sixties; she was

more than twenty years younger, and a woman of great beauty. The two of them lived together until his death in 1916.

It cannot be denied that Webber's marriage was a bad one. It is certainly not my purpose to utter a word of criticism of the woman he married, for, whatever her faults were, they were faults she couldn't help. And her greatest fault, perhaps, was that she was a member of a family that was extremely clannish, provincial, and opinionated—in the most narrow and dogged sense of the word, puritanical—and she not only inherited all these traits and convictions of her early training, they were so rooted into her very life and being that no experience, no process of living and enlargement, could ever temper them.

Her father was a man who could announce solemnly and implacably that he "would rather see a daughter of mine dead and lying in her coffin than married to a man who drank." And John Webber was a man who drank. Moreover, Amelia's father, if anyone had ever dared to put the monstrous suggestion to him, would have been perfectly capable of amplifying the Christian sentiments which have just been quoted by announcing that he would rather see a daughter of his dead and in her grave than married to a man who had been divorced. And John Webber was a man who had been divorced.

That, truly, was calamitous, the cause of untold anguish later—perhaps the chief stumbling block in their whole life together. It also seems to have been the one occasion when he did not deal with her truthfully and honestly in reference to his past life before he came to Libya Hill. He had married a girl in Baltimore in the early Seventies, when he himself had been scarcely more than a stripling old enough to vote. He mentioned it just once to one of his cronies: he said that she was only twenty, "as pretty as a picture," and an incorrigible flirt. The marriage had ended almost as suddenly as it had begun—they lived together less than a year. By that time it was apparent to them both that they had made a ruinous mistake. She went home to her people, and in the course of time divorced him.

In the Eighties, and, for that matter, much later than that, in a community such as Libya Hill, divorce was a disgraceful thing. George Webber later said that, even in his own childhood, this feeling was still so strong that a divorced person was spoken about in lowered voices, and that when one whispered furtively behind his hand that someone was "a grass widow," there was a general feeling that she was not only

not all she should be, but that she was perhaps just a cut or two above a common prostitute.

In the Eighties, this feeling was so strong that a divorced person was branded with a social stigma as great as that of one who had been convicted of crime and had served a penal sentence. Murder could have been—and was—far more easily forgiven than divorce. Crimes of violence, in fact, were frequent, and many a man had killed his man and had either escaped scot-free, or, having paid whatever penalty was imposed, had returned to take up a position of respected citizenship in the community.

Such, then, were the family and environment of the woman John Webber married. And after he left her to live with Mrs. Bartlett, he became estranged from all the hard-bitten and puritanical members of the Joyner clan. Not long thereafter, Amelia died. After his wife's death, Webber's liaison with Mrs. Bartlett continued, to the scandal of the public and the thin-lipped outrage of his wife's people.

Mark Joyner, Amelia's older brother, was a man who, after a childhood and youth of bitter poverty, was in the way of accumulating a modest competence in the hardware business. With Mag, his wife, he lived in a bright red brick house with hard, new, cement columns before it—everything about it as hard, new, ugly, bold, and raw as new-got wealth. Mag was a pious Baptist, and her sense of outraged righteousness at the open scandal of John Webber's life went beyond the limits of embittered speech. She worked on Mark, talking to him day and night about his duty to his sister's child, until at last, with a full consciousness of the approval of all good people, they took the boy, George, from his father.

The boy had been devoted to his father, but now the Joyners made him one of them. From this time forth, with the sanction of the courts, they kept him.

George Webber's childhood with his mountain kinsmen was, in spite of his sunny disposition, a dark and melancholy one. His status was really that of a charity boy, the poor relation of the clan. He did not live in the fine new house with his Uncle Mark. Instead, he lived in the little one-story frame house which his grandfather, Lafayette Joyner, had built with his own hands forty years before when he came to town.

This little house was on the same plot of ground as Mark Joyner's new brick house, a little to the right and to the rear, obscured and dwarfed by its more splendid neighbor.

Here John Webber's little boy was growing up, under the guardianship of a rusty crone of fate, Aunt Maw, a spinstress, his mother's oldest sister, old Lafayette's first child. Born thirty years before Amelia, Aunt Maw was in her seventies, but like some weird sister who preaches doom forever but who never dies, it seemed that she was ageless and eternal. From this dark old aunt of doom, and from the drawling voices of his Joyner kin, a dark picture of his mother's world, his mother's time, all the universe of the Joyner lives and blood, was built up darkly, was wrought out slowly, darkly, with an undefined but overwhelming horror, in the memory, mind, and spirit of the boy. On Winter evenings, as Aunt Maw talked in her croaking monotone by the light of a greasy little lamp—they never had electric lights in his grandfather's cottage—George heard lost voices in the mountains long ago, the wind-torn rawness, the desolate bleakness of lost days in March along clay-rutted roads in the bleak hills a hundred years ago:

Someone was dead in a hill cabin long ago. It was night. He heard the howling of the wind about the eaves of March. He was within the cabin. The rude, bare boards creaked to the tread of feet. There was no light except the flickering light of pine, the soft, swift flare of resinous wood, the crumbling ash. Against the wall, upon a bed, lay a sheeted figure of someone who had died. Around the flickering fire flame at the hearth, the drawling voices of the Joyners, one hundred years ago. The quiet, drawling voices of the Joyners who could never die and who attended the death of others like certain doom and prophecy. And in the room again there was a soft and sudden flare of pine flame flickering on the faces of the Joyners, a smell of camphor and of turpentine—a slow, dark horror in the blooded memory of the boy he could not utter.

In these and in a thousand other ways, from every intonation of Aunt Maw's life and memory, he heard lost voices in the hills long, long ago, saw cloud shadows passing in the wilderness, listened to the rude and wintry desolation of March winds that howl through the sere grasses of the mountain meadows in the month before the month when Spring is come. It came to him at night, in Winter from a room before a dying fire, in Summer from the porch of his grandfather's little house, where Aunt Maw sat with other rusty, aged crones of her own blood and kin, with their unceasing chronicle of death and doom

and terror and lost people in the hills long, long ago. It came to him in all they said and did, in the whole dark image of the world they came from, and something lost and stricken in the hills long, long ago.

And they were always right, invincibly right, triumphant over death and all the miseries they had seen and known, lived and fed upon. And he was of their blood and bone, and desperately he felt somehow like life's criminal, some pariah, an outcast to their invincible rightness, their infallible goodness, their unsullied integrity. They filled him with a nameless horror of the lost and lonely world of the old-time, forgotten hills from which they came, with a loathing, with a speechless dread.

His father was a bad man. He knew it. He had heard the chronicle of his father's infamy recounted a thousand times. The story of his father's crimes, his father's sinfulness, his father's lecherous, godless, and immoral life was written on his heart. And yet the image of his father's world was pleasant and good, and full of secret warmth and joy to him. All of the parts of town, all of the places, lands, and things his father's life had touched seemed full of happiness and joy to him. He knew that it was wicked. He felt miserably that he was tainted with his father's blood. He sensed wretchedly and tragically that he was not worthy to be a death-triumphant, ever-perfect, doom-prophetic Joyner. They filled him with the utter loneliness of desolation. He knew he was not good enough for them, and he thought forever of his father's life, the sinful warmth and radiance of his father's world.

He would lie upon the grass before his uncle's fine new house in the green-gold somnolence of afternoon and think forever of his father, thinking: "Now he's here. At this time of the day he will be here." Again:

"He will be going now along the cool side of the street—uptown—before the cigar store. Now he's there—inside the cigar store. I can smell the good cigars. He leans upon the counter, looking out into the street and talking to Ed Battle, who runs the store. There is a wooden Indian by the door, and there are the people passing back and forth along the cool and narrow glade of afternoon. Here comes Mack Hagerty, my father's friend, into the cigar store. Here are the other men who smoke cigars and chew strong and fragrant plugs of apple tobacco. . . .

"Here is the barber shop next door, the snip of shears, the smell of tonics, of shoe polish and good leather, the incessant drawling voices of the barbers. Now he'll be going in to get shaved. I can hear the

strong, clean scraping of the razor across the harsh stubble of his face. Now I hear people speaking to him. I hear the hearty voices of the men, all raised in greeting. They are all men who come out of my father's world—the sinful, radiant, and seductive world, the bad world that I think about so much. All the men who smoke cigars and chew tobacco and go to Forman's barber shop know my father. The good people like the Joyners go along the other side of the street—the shadeless side of afternoon, that has the bright and light. . . .

“Now he has finished at the barber's. Now he goes around the corner quickly to O'Connell's place. The wicker doors flap back together as he passes in. There is a moment's malty reek of beer, a smell of sawdust, lemon, rye, and Angostura bitters. There is the lazy flapping of a wooden fan, a moment's glimpse of the great, polished bar, huge mirrors, bottles, the shine of polished glasses, the brass foot-rail, dented with the heel-marks of a thousand feet, and Tim O'Connell, thick-jowled, aproned, leaning on the bar. . . .

“Now he is out again. See him go along the street. Now he is at the livery stable. I see the great, raw shape of rusty, corrugated tin, the wooden incline, pulped by many hoofs, as it goes down, the great hoofs clumping on the wooden floors, the hoofs kicked swiftly, casually, against the stalls, the wooden floors bestrewn with oaty droppings, the clean, dry whiskings of coarse tails across great polished rumps of glossy brown, the niggers talking gruffly to the horses in the stalls, the low, dark voices, gruff and tender, hoarse voices full of horseplay, the horse smell, and horse knowingness, men and horses both together, close: ‘Get over dar! Whar you goin’!’ The rubber tires of carriages and buggies, the smooth rumble of the rubber tires upon the battered wooden floors. . . . The little office to the left where my father likes to sit and talk with the livery-stable men, the battered little safe, the old roll-top desk, the creaking chairs, the little, blistered, cast-iron stove, the dirty windows, never washed, the smell of leather, old, worn ledgers, harness. . . .”

So did he think forever of his father's life, his father's places, movements, the whole enchanted picture of his father's world.

His was, in fact, a savagely divided childhood. Compelled to grow up in an environment and a household which he hated with every

instinctive sense of loathing and repulsion of his being, he found himself longing constantly for another universe shaped in the colors of his own desire. And because he was told incessantly that the one he hated was good and admirable, and the one for which he secretly longed was evil and abominable, he came to have a feeling of personal guilt that was to torment him for many years. His sense of *place*, the feeling for specific locality that later became so strong in him, came, he thought, from all these associations of his youth—from his overwhelming conviction, or prejudice, that there were “good” places and “bad” ones. This feeling was developed so intensely in his childhood that there was hardly a street or a house, a hollow or a slope, a backyard or an alleyway in his own small world that did not bear the color of this prejudice. There were certain streets in town that he could scarcely endure to walk along, and there were certain houses that he could not pass without a feeling of bleak repulsion and dislike.

By the time he was twelve years old, he had constructed a kind of geography of his universe, composed of these powerful and instinctive affections and dislikes. The picture of the “good” side of the universe, the one the Joyners said was bad, was almost always one to which his father was in one way or another attached. It was a picture made up of such specific localities as his father’s brick and lumber yard; Ed Battle’s cigar and tobacco store—this was a place where he met and passed his father every Sunday morning on his way to Sunday School; John Forman’s barber shop on the northwest corner of the Square, and the grizzled, inky heads, the well-known faces, of the negro barbers—John Forman was a negro, and George Webber’s father went to his shop almost every day in the week; the corrugated tin front and the little dusty office of Miller and Cashman’s livery stable, another rendezvous of his father’s; the stalls and booths of the City Market, which was in a kind of great, sloping, concrete basement underneath the City Hall; the fire department, with its arched doors, the wooden stomping of great hoofs, and its circle of shirt-sleeved men—firemen, baseball players, and local idlers—sitting in split-bottom chairs of evenings; the look and feel of cellars everywhere—for this, curiously, was one of his strong obsessions—he always had a love of secret and enclosed places; the interiors of theatres, and the old Opera House on nights when a show was in town; McCormack’s drug store, over at the southwest corner of the Square opposite his uncle’s hardware store, with its onyx fountain, its slanting wooden fans, its cool and dark interior, and its