

Letters from Herbert
by
Don Lauria

The envelope was wrinkled, as if the postman had carried it in his hip pocket all the way from the writer's home in Coarsegold. It had been addressed to me, but a line was stricken through "Don," and "Anna" Lauria was the addressee. The scrawl was unmistakable ... a letter from TM Herbert:

Dearest,

We must never let the clod know how close we are. OK now here's the plan; you and the kids will come up with Don next weekend. We will, of course, be together almost all the time, however, I will pretend that I am all hot to go climbing with him (or as we would say, "IT") Now there are places to slide around in the snow near Rixon's Pinnacle for the kids and Squaw while I entertain the clod. Later on we'll have drinks and music and I will do an impersonation of someone who is dumb and ugly — you won't believe it! So cancel all rinky-dink Brownie and Cub Scout goodies and order all those brats to prepare for a weekend with HERBERT!

See you next weekend,

TM Valentino

P.S. Have you thought of a way to break the news about our overnight snow caving to IT?

Letters from Herbert arrived frequently during the spring months of Yosemite's transitional years - 1967 through 1975. I saved them as vehicles of his personality - his humor. I will not apologize for TM's choice of words, because those who know him realize that to edit Herbert is to mute Beethoven — you lose the essence. His letters are gems, his humor is scathing, yet harmless; coarse, yet witty. He uses vulgarity to amuse. His lack of propriety occurs only among his peers ... those whom he cannot offend. TM is really quite shy outside of his milieu.

The following are excerpts from assorted letters:

(on his physical prowess) I now weigh 103 1/2 lbs. and yet I can still lift the front end of a D-9 tractor. And also I can hold a full lever on a high bar with my wee-wee.

(on having a good time) ... If climbing at Joshua Tree is out how about a get-together at your place — we can get drunk and really tear the place up - break windows and furniture and leave the place in flames ...

(on remembering climbing routes) ... Some guy wrote me about that Baja Rock. Shit! I can easily remember my name and age, but things like what route we did - no way ... Maybe what model and year car I have ... would he accept that, do you think?

(on the next weekend) ... Then Friday morning we cut out to Ventura and climb somewhere Saturday for thousands of heroic glorious feet ... Then Saturday night we drink and take powerful artificial drug stimulants and cruise the boulevard for young girls - you will pose as

my uncle who is driving. We will stash your old lady and kids ... Our old-bag wives will pose as our mothers...

(on family living) ... Can you come to the Valley over Easter vacation? Or are your kids gonna play jacks ... And your wife is probably entering the local knitting contest ... Are you a man or a mouse? Order all those dip-shits into the car and tell them to head for the Valley, where your wife and I have special hideaways while you stay home and spray the aphids and pull crab grass ...

(on becoming more masculine) ... Now why don't you quit hanging around with those pacifistic, long-haired queers down there - come up and we'll kick shit out of a couple of bars. The ones where the shit stompers hang out. Then head over to Hornitos and take on some dudes on the pool table. Then a bunch of clawing scatching women will be fighting for us

Herbert was so frustrated by his inability to arouse a written response from me that he often sent a multiple-choice reply for my convenience. Here is a sampling, shortened for lack of space:

Don,

I'm doing some correspondence psychology work; could you fill out this form so's I can see what kind of a weird perverted mother-fucker you really are? Check appropriate boxes.

- I'm fairly well-adjusted.*
- Well I'm not so adjusted as I'd like.*
- Oh, I'm all fucked up.*
- Creepin' green Chinese crud, I've got a sabre up my ass!*
- None of the above.*
- Some of the above.*
- Every other one of the above.*
- I'll kill anyone or anything that even looks at me ...*
- I wanna fuck a sheep — an' a cow, an' a dog ... an' a big clawing Bengal tiger.*

The following note came to me in the aftermath of a bawdy, outrageous party held in old Camp 4. Joy Herron and Mick Burke had been dancing to a blaring Stones album in my campsite when the rangers arrived. Tourists had peered from the surrounding Winnebagos unable to hide their disgust. Herbert had gathered his family and fled into the night, leaving his lantern and stove on my table.

We came back to Camp 4 at about 8:15 a.m., but you had already gone. You should have seen us sneak in — we parked our car many tables away and whisked our stoves and stuff off as we walked by. Many evil eyes were upon us — so I had to disguise myself — when you next see me I will be in the form of a large sugar pine.

See you, TM.

Editor's Note: This article was printed originally in Climbing Magazine in the early 70s – then again in their 20th anniversary issue in 1990. It was also published in Jim Perrin's ***Mirrors in the Cliffs***, 1983, Diadem Books Ltd, London