

The Curb in the Sky by James Thurber.The Curb in the Sky

By James Thurber (1894-1961)

When Charlie Deshler announced that he was going to marry Dorothy, someone said he would lose his mind posthaste. "No," said a wit who knew them both, "post hoc." Dorothy had begun, when quite young, to finish sentences for people. Sometimes she finished them wrongly, which annoyed the person who was speaking, and sometimes she finished them correctly, which annoyed the speaker even more.

"When William Howard Taft was--" some guest in Dorothy's family home would begin. "President!" Dorothy would pipe up. The speaker may have meant to say "President" or he might have meant to say "Young" or "Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States." In any case, he would shortly put on his hat and go home. Like most parents, Dorothy's parents did not seem to be conscious that her mannerism was a nuisance. Very likely they thought that it was cute, or even bright. It is even probable that when Dorothy's mother first said, "Come, Dorothy, eat your -" and Dorothy said, "Spinach, dear," the former telephones Dorothy's father at the office and told him about it, and he told everybody he met that day about it - and the next day and the day after.

When Dorothy grew up she became quite pretty and so even more of a menace. Gentlemen became attracted to her and then attached to her. Emotionally she stirred them, but mentally she soon began to wear them down. Even in her late teens she began correcting their English. "Not 'was' Arthur," she would say, "'were.' 'Were prepared.' See?" Most of her admirers tolerated this habit because of their interest in her lovely person, but as time went on and her interest in them remained more instructive than

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sentimental, they slowly drifted away to less captious, if dumber, girls.

Charlie Deshler, however, was an impetuous man, of the sweep-them-off-their-feet persuasion, and he became engaged to Dorothy so quickly and married her in so short a time that, being deaf to the warnings of his friends, whose concern he regarded as mere jealousy, he really didn't know anything about Dorothy except that she was pretty and bright-eyed and (to him) desirable.

Dorothy as a wife came, of course, into her great flowering: she took to correcting Charlie's stories. He had traveled widely and experienced greatly and was a truly excellent raconteur. Dorothy was, during their courtship, genuinely interested in him and his stories, and since she had never shared any of the adventures he told about, she could not know when he made mistakes in time or in place or in identities. Beyond suggesting a change here and there in the number of a verb, she more or less let him alone. Charlie spoke rather good English, anyway - he knew when to say "were" and when to say "was" after "if" - and this was another reason he didn't find Dorothy out.

I didn't call on them for quite a while after they were married, because I liked Charlie and I knew I would feel low if I saw him coming out of the anesthetic of her charms and beginning to feel the first pains of reality. When I did finally call, conditions were, of course, all that I had feared. Charlie began to tell, at dinner, about a motor trip the two had made to this town and that - I never found out for sure what towns, because Dorothy denied almost everything Charlie said. "The next day," he would say, "we got an early start and drove two hundred miles to Fairview - " "Well," Dorothy would say, "I wouldn't call it early. It wasn't as early as the first day we set out, when we got up at about seven. And we drove a hundred and eighty miles

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because I remember looking at that mileage thing when we started."

"Anyway, when we got to Fairview -" Charlie would go on. But Dorothy would stop him. "Was it Fairview that day, darling?" she would ask. Dorothy often interrupted Charlie by asking him if he were right, instead of telling him that he was wrong, but it amounted to the same thing, for he would reply, "Yes, I'm sure it was Fairview," she would say: "But it wasn't, darling," and then go on with the story herself. (She called everybody that she differed from darling.)

Once or twice, when I called on them or they called on me, Dorothy would let Charlie get almost to the climax of some interesting account of a happening and then, like a tackler from behind, just throw him as he was about to cross the goal line. There is nothing in life more shocking to the nerves and to the mind than this. Some husbands will sit back amiably - almost as it seems, proudly - when their wives interrupt, and let them go on with the story, but these are beaten husbands. Charlie did not become beaten. At the end of the second year of their marriage, when you visited the Deshlers, Charlie would begin some outlandish story about a dream he had had, knowing that Dorothy could not correct him on his own dreams. They became the only life that he had that was his own.

"I thought I was running an airplane," he would say, "made out of telephone wires and pieces of old leather. I was trying to make it fly to the moon, taking off from my bedroom. About halfway up to the moon, however, a man who looked like Santa Claus, only he was dressed in the uniform of a customs officer, waved at me to stop - he was in a plan made of telephone wires too. So I pulled over to a cloud. "'Here,' he said to me, 'you can't go to the moon, if you are the man who invented these wedding cookies.' Then he showed me

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a cookie in the shape of a man and woman being married, made of dough and fastened firmly to a round, crisp cookie base." So he would go on.

Any psychiatrist will tell you that at the end of the way Charlie was going lies madness in the form of monomania. You can't live in a fantastic dream world, night in and night out and then day in and day out, and remain sane. The substance began to die slowly out of Charlie's life, and he began to live entirely in shadow. And since monomania of this sort is likely to lead in the end to the reiteration of one particular story, Charlie's invention began to grow thin and he eventually took to telling, over and over again, the first dream he had ever described - the story of his curious flight toward the moon in an airplane made of telephone wires. It was extremely painful. It saddened us all.

After a month or two, Charlie finally had to be sent to an asylum. I went out of town when they took him away, but Joe Fultz, who went with him, wrote me about it. "He seemed to like it up here right away," Joe wrote. "He's calmer and his eyes look better/" (Charlie had developed a wild, hunted look). "Of course," concluded Joe, "he's finally got away from that woman."

It was a couple of weeks later that I drove up to the asylum to see Charlie. He was lying on a cot on a big screened in porch, looking wan and thin. Dorothy was sitting on a chair beside his bed, bright-eyed and eager. I was somehow surprised to see her there, having figured that Charlie had, at least, won sanctuary from his wife. He looked quite mad. He began at once to tell me the story of his trip to the moon. He got to the part where the man who looked like Santa Clause waved at him to stop. "He was in a plane made of telephone wires too," said Charlie. "So I pulled over to the curb - "

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"No. You pulled over to a cloud," said Dorothy. "There aren't any curbs in the sky. There couldn't be. You pulled over to a cloud."

Charlie sighed and turned slightly in his bed and looked at me. Dorothy looked to me too with her pretty smile.

"He always gets that story wrong," she said.

The End.

"The Curb in the Sky" Tells of Charlie Deshler's marriage to Dorothy, a pretty, bright-eyed thing that always finished sentences for other people, and continually interrupted while anyone was telling a story. Charlie was a true raconteur, but Betty soon changed that. Each time he would start a story, she would interrupt by asking if he thought this or that was right, etc. Soon, Charlie began telling about dreams. These wore thin after a while; And then he began repeating the same one over again. He landed in an asylum a month after. His friend went to visit him. He was telling the moon story and Betty sat there correcting him.

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James Thurber (1894-1961). American author, cartoonist and celebrated wit. He was one of the foremost American humorists of the 20th century. Thurber was best known for his cartoons and short stories, published mainly in The New Yorker magazine and collected in his numerous books. He is also the author of The Secret Life of Walter Mitty and the creator of numerous New Yorker magazine cover cartoons. Thurber wrote nearly 40 books, and won a Tony Award for the Broadway play, "A Thurber Carnival", in which he often starred as himself.