

First Night in The West

or

Sir, Your Waterbed is Leaking

The Greeks gave us the subject of theoretical hydrodynamics. They gave us inventions such as the clepsydra and the screw of Archimedes that utilize water. Actually, they tried out the waterbed and found it wanting. While one might easily imagine Cleopatra barging down the Nile and seducing Anthony on a waterbed, Shakespeare makes no mention of such a thing. "Eureka" was not said of waterbeds. There are good reasons for this. But why an idea that flunked should have been resurrected twenty five hundred years later with great éclat and some success is one of the Great Mysteries, on par with the transmigration of souls.

I have heard it said that there are some waterbeds in The East, but I have no knowledge of them. The West, au contraire, is infested with them, and the waterbed in Salt Lake City nearly did us in. When we

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arrived, the apartment we had sublet was not quite ready and we were offered temporary lodging in an adjoining apartment. If I had known that the temporary apartment was furnished only with a waterbed, I would have said "Thank you very much" and rung up a motel. But what does one do when one arrives in a strange city late at night with seven bags after an all-day trek? One says, "Fine. An adventure. Next best thing to bronco busting. And cheaper by half."

The waterbed in question was seven and a half feet square and nine inches thick. It was placed snugly in a solid wood frame. With a slight knowledge of physics, you can work out how much water it contains. I'll tell you: six tons of the normal chlorinated stuff. A waterbed seven and a half feet square is jocularly known in these parts as "of Nebuchadnezzar size". This point is allowed. It will easily accommodate two people, three or four pieces of luggage and a brace of French poodles. One Nebuchadnezzar and one Jereboam would easily solve the shortage of water in the Colorado River. Come to think of it, perhaps that's why there is a shortage in the river.

Now what's the first thing one does when approaching a strange bed? Kick its tires? Guess again. Look at

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its teeth? Another guess. Fire a gun to see if it's gun shy? One more little guess. Press down? You've got it! Now, when you press down on a mattress, the mattress gives a bit with a recognizable consistency depending upon whether it has an inner spring or is filled with cornhusks. One gets to know. But when one presses down on a waterbed, a large tidal wave issues from the point of pressure. It proceeds across the bed to the opposite edge and gets reflected back and forth. This kind of horseplay can go on for fifteen minutes before the waterbed settles down to some semblance of tranquillity. This much activity results from the pressure of a single hand. When a person sits down on it, the amplitude of the wave is so great that with a bit of practise, he can arrange for a cushion shot which will pop the luggage off the bed and into the living room.

So much for waterbeds as wellsprings of applied mathematics. It is now time for beddy-byes. Having donned one's pajamas, one next climbs in. Ha! That's what you think! You don't just climb in. You can't. There's not enough support. You sidle in by executing a choreographic sort of manoeuvre which defies verbal description and which puts you into immediate jeopardy of a sprained back and a twisted neck.

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We lucked out on this and sank into a medium which, so they say, supported us equally at every point of contact. Our waterbed bag (casing? bottle?) was not filled to capacity, and there issued a gentle gurgling which is reminiscent to some of the Perfect Wave breaking at Diamond Head, Hawaii, and to others of the sound of the waters of Lake Winⁿepesaukee slap-_nping against the wharf of the Hotel Mountainview, said waters having been whipped up by an evening breeze. When your partner adjusts a leg, the waters gurgle anew, a wave makes for the opposite shore, and as weariness takes over, you imagine yourself to be in a small row-boat crossing the Atlantic in March.

We are not asleep yet. We can't get warm. The water, at a nice room temperature of 70° F., drains all our body heat down to a nice room temperature of 70° F. One can freeze to death in a waterbed at 70° F. We heard later that electric heaters are available, but it is evident that only the very rich can afford to heat up such a large quantity of water without risking bankruptcy. Ultimately, by adjusting our mutual geometry so as to present the least amount of human surface to the waterbed, we minimized our heat loss and fell asleep.

We dreamt of the rise and fall of the tides,

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twice daily, and of strange hydrodynamic phenomena such as the tsunami and the seiche.

"Hey. Wake up. We're drowning."

"Wassamatter?"

"The bed is leaking."

"The bed is leaking?"

"You heard me."

"Waterbeds can't leak. They are leakproof."

"Go tell it on the mountain."

"Get a little Dutch Boy to stop the hole."

"Cut the comedy. My pyjama is soaked through and I'm freezing to death."

The water was surfacing from the center of the bed. We got a couple of towels and spread them and went back to sleep. Ten minutes later the towels were soaked.

"Let's check into a motel. We have no alternative."

"At 3:23 A.M. local time, 5:23 A.M. true time? Besides, we don't have a car."

"Let's call a plumber."

"You don't call a plumber. You call the AAA and tell them to come and fix a puncture."

At 3:32 A.M. local time, 5:32 A.M. true time, we moved the dry bed clothes to the bedroom floor and tucked in on top of the half-inch wall-to-wall carpet-

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ing. We prayed that the dam would not burst on top of us. We had heard of such things happening in Idaho. Why we didn't move to the living room is a mystery, but at 5:32 A.M., true time, one is not very bright.

