

## **The Atom**

**by Raymond Abbott**

I had been at that social work job for something more than eight years and I was burned out, and what's more, I knew it. What made the job halfway tolerable, I suppose, was the ocean nearby, Plum Island Beach, and frequent long walks, sometimes alone, sometimes with my Lab, Fig. Like most Labs, that dog loved the water, any water, any time.

Plum Island at this time wasn't well known; I bet it isn't today, either, but there is a reason for that. The swimming can be treacherous and therefore the island is not good as a family beach. In addition, the flies in the summer are awful. And for those who lived on the island, there was the problem that the water was brackish, and drinking water had to be hauled in from nearby Newburyport. Not on all parts of the island was the water bad, but most of it was.

I don't know how many times I walked by the Atom (the word just barely visible after years of wear by the wind and the rain and the salt air) before I realized one spring day that someone was living in the cottage. I was so used to seeing it—perched atop a sand dune the way it was—closed and boarded up tight, that I didn't think of it as a place someone actually might live in. Obviously I was wrong. Yet, for all the Atom wasn't in size and style, and I suppose comfort, I could well imagine a writer, myself perhaps, snuggling up in that small space with a novel in the works. Outside, a sea running high, and, inside, a strong wind blowing in and the sound of a typewriter clicking away hour after hour.

Had I been watching the Atom more carefully—and I had no reason to be doing so—I would have noticed the shutters had been off for several days in preparation for the arrival of an occupant. But it was a dim light through a window on a gray afternoon in April that told me that at long last someone was in residence. I wondered who it was, of course, but that first day I went on by and didn't think anymore about it. The next day it was the same. I saw the light again, but I went by. But on the third day, I decided I must investigate. I had to know who lived there. I approached the Atom from the side facing the ocean to the back door. I climbed the steps and onto what I soon learned was a not very safe porch, for it swayed under my weight. A white-haired lady met me at the door and I guessed she was easily seventy, perhaps somewhat older than that. It was difficult to tell. She had been sitting in the tiny kitchen watching me approach from the ocean but never expecting that I was coming to see her, as she told me right away.

"Nobody ever visits me," she explained, with no bitterness but as a statement of

fact. "But do come in. Please come in," she said. And so it was that in this simple and direct way I met Madge Coombs, a native of the mountains of West Virginia.

She didn't appear to care why I had come; it was enough for her, I guess, that someone was at her door. I could have been there to rob her or do worse, but apparently that thought didn't occur to her. Not on Plum Island, at any rate.

However, I felt a need to explain my presence, and so I did. "I was just going by," I said, feeling a little foolish with what I was doing, but plowing on. "I saw the light and I've seen this place boarded up for so long and it is my favorite cottage at Plum Island and I've long wondered who lived here and I just had to find out for myself and . . ."

I went on at great length, even telling her how I visualized the place as a wonderful nook for a writer to hole up for a winter in splendid isolation to write a great novel, maybe one about the sea. I didn't say I considered myself that novelist, but I suspected she guessed as much, and right away, too. She smiled and listened attentively. And then she laughed. I didn't expect this, and it made me more uncomfortable and self-conscious. I was making a big fool of myself, I decided, and I guess she saw how I felt, for she quickly said, "I'm not laughing at you, Heaven knows. The Atom, you see, may provide the splendid isolation you're seeking, but it would be a terrible place to spend the winter. It is so drafty. Matter of fact, you couldn't survive the winter in here. It isn't at all winterized and you would freeze. The wind blows right through the place."

She then went on to speak of the joys of the summers of Plum Island for her when she was able to live in the Atom and be so near the sea, and how much that meant to her, particularly at her age. There was a loneliness about her, but it was so different from the loneliness that I had been accustomed to seeing in people her age, and I had seen plenty as a social worker over the past few years. The worst I saw were the elderly poor in Boston, where they were literally prisoners in tenements along Massachusetts Avenue. I was grateful to be away from that Boston assignment and wished some of the old people that I'd met could have made their escape too. Alas, I knew that was hardly possible.

Our visit was brief this first day. I had my job to return to, and, as it was, I was stealing time from my duties for these daily walks. It was time I was supposed to be using in making home visits, and I would have to rush my visits this afternoon, I knew, in order to do everything. But I did take time to have the tea that was offered. I promised to return another day, and return I did two days later and many times that summer. She told me how she and her husband, Albert, had built the Atom one summer way back in the early thirties. That was the second year they were on Plum Island. The first they spent camping out, she said. Both were English teachers in a small college in the mountains of West Virginia. After Albert died, she kept coming back alone every year that she could manage it. Illness had kept her away the year before, she said, but now she was much improved.

"But when the wind blows through the cracks in the thin boards, I know it is time to pack up and go home. But always I stay until after Labor Day."

"Do you know what the Atom means?" she asked me one day. I thought I did. The cottage was tiny. It couldn't, in fact, be much smaller and still exist, and an atom is also small and so the two went together, or so I thought. "Wrong," she said. That wasn't it at all.

"When we built this place," she explained, "nobody knew much about atoms, or if they did they weren't talking about them. The Atom is an abbreviation that Albert thought up. It means, 'Above The Ocean's Motions.' He built the Atom on the highest

dune we could find, and the dune wasn't eroded the way it is today." It was, I knew, still the highest spot on that part of Plum Island, and I knew about these things because I had hiked most of the island.

"And, of course, there weren't all the neighbors we have now, either," she continued. "And some of the houses that were built later aren't here anymore. Several burned down, I think, and others got washed out to sea, and I guess a couple or three were torn down. Somehow, though, the Atom held on as you see it now. Albert did a good job building it and he wasn't any kind of a craftsman."

Yes, he did a good job, I thought. It might need work, but it was still standing at least, and that was something, considering where it was and that was about as close to the sea as it could be without actually being in it.

How fast the time went that summer! I visited most every afternoon I could get away. I would announce my arrival by saying, "I've come for my afternoon tea," and she would laugh and her eyes would smile, if eyes can do that. Frequently, when I arrived I would find her with her nose in a book. Her eyesight wasn't good, from what she told me, but then again I didn't have to be told. She used a giant magnifying glass in order to read, and this on top of thick reading glasses. She must be darn near blind, I thought, but we never discussed it further. It was as if there were too many other things to talk about. She raved on for nearly half an hour one day about some famous Australian writer, a novelist I had never heard of, much to my embarrassment.

But books, writers, world affairs, it was all fair game that summer, and it was the kind of thing I needed. And I realized I had discovered in this frail lady somebody who had an incredible zest for living at a time when I felt I had so little. I wondered how she did it. She was easily twice my age. I was then 31 or 32 and damn discouraged about things I had no part in and no control over, while she was literally thirsting for information and new ideas and news of any kind. This was something short of remarkable to me, for I was tired of all the information I was required to digest in my life both on and off the job.

Soon the summer was spent and Labor Day at hand and Madge talked of leaving—going back to West Virginia—and before we could have a proper good-bye and a final cup of tea, she was gone. It happened like this because I became unusually busy with my work; things weren't good economically in that part of Massachusetts (which affected my workload), and time got away and before I knew it, it was October when I got out to Plum Island. I was to find the Atom closed up, the shutters back on the windows and the doors sealed. Madge maintained there was no way to tightly seal the Atom. She would laugh when she said how totally impossible this would be to accomplish.

I looked for a note, but there was none and I thought, well, there is next year to resume our visits and conversations, but I was sad too that I hadn't had an opportunity to say good-bye. It wasn't until almost Christmas and after another busy couple of months at work that I came upon an old copy of a New England magazine Madge once said she enjoyed. I guess finding that magazine jarred my memory, for I had made a promise to write her and I hadn't, though we had exchanged addresses. I decided now was a good time to send her a gift subscription of the magazine as a Christmas gift. It was January before I heard from her and then it was these lines: "I'm rather overwhelmed you are sending me a gift. It is I who should be sending you gifts—not the other way around." And she went on, "I just ache for the sight and smell and the sound of the sea and think of course I am tough enough to endure the hardship of waiting for summer and the joy of spending weeks on top of the dunes."

We wrote occasionally through that winter. By spring, though, the letters stopped

coming and since our correspondence was irregular at best, I didn't notice right away. Besides, I figured she was getting ready for the return trip to Plum Island and I knew from what she had told me that travel in her condition (she also had bad arthritis, I neglected to say) was never easy. Suddenly, though, I realized I was writing her but not getting any replies and that troubled me. Clearly, she planned to return that summer. I thought of a letter that had arrived weeks before in which she wrote, "I miss watching the moon rise from the ocean. Too many houses clutter this town to allow me that freedom I have at the edge of the sea." That didn't sound like someone who wouldn't be coming back. The thought occurred to me, of course, that something had happened to her, but I had no way of knowing. She had never mentioned family except for a nephew who lived in Fall River, Massachusetts, and I had never met him or even heard his name. It was just "my nephew" when she spoke of him.

When by May the place remained shuttered, I had to think something was wrong, and one day I chanced to meet a lady who lived a couple of cottages over from the Atom. Maybe she will know something, I thought, and so I asked. She told me Madge had fallen and broken her hip, but she didn't offer any more information and didn't say how she had learned this news, then added Madge was recuperating and wouldn't be on Plum Island this year.

Then, at long last, I received a letter from Madge. I guessed she hadn't answered me before because she was still in the hospital.

"I've been pleasantly reminded of the enjoyable and profitable hours you gave me when you dropped in to see me last summer. The broken hip is keeping me from spending months on Plum Island (how I missed watching the stars and the planets and the ocean's changes this year). I had been reading Gore Vidal's *Aaron Burr* for at least two uninterrupted hours because it was a library book. I wished to finish it that afternoon before having to dress for the honors dinner on the Concord campus at 6 p.m. I jumped to my feet, found my right leg had fallen asleep *to the hip*, but just kept on trying to walk. One leg was like a wet rag, the other an unbalanced stick of wood, landed me on the bare floor with a thump. I was shocked by the suddenness, but I knew from the pain that the thighbone in the left leg was broken. So I've lost a late spring and a summer, far too long for anyone as old as I . . .

I like to think that when you walk the beach you check the looks of that little house. I hope the Atom hasn't yet fallen flat."

And she wrote of other concerns, saying how much that is corrupt and ugly and vicious in all the news made it so that she didn't sleep well at night.

"I am sickened at the horrors of Honduras, and the famine everywhere appalls my soul."

But she also managed to speak of more hopeful things, one being that she had graduated to a walker and her doctor told her she would soon walk again on her own. "I am on the mend," she announced rather joyfully at the end of a second letter, but of the half-dozen letters I received that spring and summer (before they abruptly stopped) the one I remember best was when she said she treasured the memory of the contact she had with me and that "whenever I hear from you I'm reminded of some favorite lines William Wordsworth wrote in 'Tintern Abbey' which was:

These beauteous forms,  
Through a long absence, have not been to me  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owned to them,

In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
 Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
 And passing even into my purer mind,  
 With tranquil restoration: feelings too  
 Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,  
 As have no slight or trivial influence  
 On that best portion of a good man's life,  
 His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
 Of kindness and of love."

I know I must somehow end this and there may not be a satisfactory ending. For I simply didn't hear from her again that summer or anytime after that, yet my letters to her didn't come back to me, so someone was getting the mail. I moved away from Plum Island that fall, moved out to western Massachusetts, in an effort to find a satisfactory life while remaining employed with the state of Massachusetts (maybe incompatible goals, I think now). I go back to Plum Island once in a while and I can report this much: the old Atom is no longer there. There is a new Atom in its place and it is nothing like that old one. Who would want to build an old shack? Who could or would be allowed with today's zoning laws? The new place is modern and fairly large, and painted a gray-blue, and it has a large cinderblock foundation. It is just plain ugly. Comfortable, I am sure, but ugly as sin. The place is being lived in, perhaps year-round now—it must be winterized. I have seen a light in the window and a car in the driveway. I once saw a young woman going in. Who she was I don't know, and I didn't really want to stop and ask, for whatever crazy, unexplained reason. Perhaps it is Madge's family. What family is there? She never spoke of anyone except that nephew from Fall River. As far as I knew, her life consisted of Albert, the college life in West Virginia and, of course, the Atom, but not necessarily in that order of importance.