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Hanford Reach

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MILES WILSON

Hanford Reach

So far as I know, my father was the only visible Democrat on our block. There always seemed to be an Adlai Stevenson sign in our yard, wilting under the Nebraska sky and martial rows of "I Like Ike" marching smartly down the street as inevitable as the Fourth of July. This could only have happened twice, but memory insists that every September as we pulled into the driveway at the end of another educational tour of the West, our sign was festooned with Republican bumper stickers and one year some condoms and an empty tin of baking soda.

About the vacations, my sister and I agree, we cannot be wrong. Each August we would gather in the family Dodge and, stuck to the plastic seat covers with our resinous sweat, strike out across the West in pursuit of that year's theme. We stuck to the West because of my father's deep distrust of anything east of where we lived. Omaha and Lincoln were suspect, to say nothing of what lay beyond the Missouri. The trip themes were eclectic but shaped by a prairie populist's belief in progress and progressive politics. One year we visited the largest dams on the Columbia, Missouri, Snake, and Colorado. The next year we drove every completed segment of the burgeoning interstate highway system. The summer my sister prevailed in her campaign to wear a two-piece suit in the motel pools, we toured massacre sites: Wounded Knee, Sand Creek, Bear Paw. Smug in the lime green bikini that made her resemble, I thought, a popsicle melted on its stick, Jennifer asked why we didn't go to the Little Big Horn. There was the summer we visited the birthplace of every western Democratic governor (a long drive for a short list), taking care always to remain half a state away from Mom's extended family. And one edgy trip, cut short by some unspoken ailment of Mom's, missile silos in the Dakotas. What you could see was a lot of empty prairie and sky on the other side of electrically charged fence line. Whether the missiles represented progress or politics was never gotten around to.

Dad owned a photography studio, inherited from his father. Edging along the financial brink, his grip on solvency pried at by

Kodak slide projectors and Super 8 systems, Polaroid cameras and a photo booth at Woolworths, my father somehow persevered well past retirement. A third grade teacher, my mother brought home, I guessed, a big chunk of the family income. On our tours of the West, my father never took a camera.

At the end of World War II, Dad had shipped out from San Francisco when they dropped the bomb. He stayed in the Reserves and was called up for Korea where he was detailed to intelligence, printing and cataloging aerial reconnaissance and combat photos.

He spoke of this only once. The winter I turned fifteen, the pilot light in our oil furnace would sometimes go out at night. My bedroom was the coldest in the house, and I could shiver in the covers till morning or go down to the basement and relight the pilot. Nobody else would notice soon enough.

When I flipped on the light that night, he was sitting beside the furnace in a rocking chair that had been awaiting repair for a while. I'd never seen my father drink, though I assumed most men did. I didn't see a glass.

"You remember Wounded Knee?" he said. "You remember what that was about?"

"Sure," I said. The ductwork popped as the cold made its way along the pipes. Dad was still blinking away the light.

"In Korea, they brought in some pictures. When they first came up in the developer, I thought somebody had blown up a laundry or some kind of clothing business. Except it was under a bridge. Then I saw. It was people, piles and piles of them on top of each other. In their clothes. You know, just the clothes you saw them in every day. They didn't look anything like a uniform. That just wasn't a mistake anybody could make."

The words shriveled in the air. Behind him was a stain on the wall where water had seeped through one wet spring.

"A couple weeks later a colonel came up, a full colonel. He took the prints and negatives. He said he wanted to impress on us the importance of secrecy; he said it would be a court martial offense to ever talk about what we saw. By then there were three of us that knew. I couldn't figure who'd ever ask. Also, I couldn't figure why we shouldn't call the North Koreans what they were: murderers, war criminals."

He stopped and looked down at the bottle in his hand as if he couldn't bring to mind how it had gotten there. He screwed on the lid and set it carefully behind a paint can on the musty shelf of home improvement projects.

"Then on the ship back I ran into the combat photographer who took the pictures. It was our guys that did it. Those people were hiding under the bridge from our fighter planes and we just opened up on them. A lot of women and kids. Babies even. A heavy weapons platoon did most of it."

"We did that?" I said. "You mean Americans?"

"You see where Wounded Knee comes into the picture? You think we're the good guys?"

I didn't know what to say about that, so I just stood there feeling stupid and cold and worried.

"Did your mother send you down here?"

"No."

After a while I said I thought I'd light the pilot and get back to bed. As I topped the stairs, he called up to me.

"Turn off the light, Stevie," he said. He hadn't called me Stevie since I was a kid.

Three weeks later Mom left. There were separate notes in sealed envelopes for Jennifer and me. Jennifer read hers across from me at the kitchen table. She said one word, "fuck," and tore the letter into pieces small enough to flush away in the sink. I had figured she knew the word, but I'd never heard her use it. I took my envelope upstairs and tucked it into my stash of *Playboys*.

You can live in a house with your parents all your life and never have a clue. Maybe Dad didn't have a clue either, but a couple weeks later he had some of it figured out. It had snowed and melted and snowed again on top of the frozen melt. In the dark, we were in and out of the ditch twice before we got to Lincoln. Jennifer was wedged in a corner of the back seat, as far from Dad as she could get. I was up front, figuring this had something to do with Mom and wondering how I was going to get out alive from Mr. Bomarto's algebra test in third period the next morning.

We pulled right into the driveway of a house pretty close to campus. Mom took courses there sometimes in the summer, and I'd been in the neighborhood before. Dad reached under the seat, and

for a weird moment I thought he had pulled out a gun though I had never seen one in his hands before.

What he had was a portable loudspeaker that I remembered from when he announced Jaycee softball games. Some snow eddied in as he rolled the window down.

“Come on out, whore. Come on out to your family.”

He said that a couple more times. Jennifer started to cry, and a light came on next door. Then Mom came out, wearing a man’s plaid shirt untucked. She walked right up to the car and laid her hand on Dad’s wrist.

“Go home, Frank,” she said. “Take the children home. It’s over.”

And so it was, though Mom came home in a few days and stayed till school was out. Dad slept in the basement. Because they never yelled at each other or threw stuff, I kept thinking things would be OK. When I asked Jennifer what she thought was going to happen, she laughed in a new way that felt like some kind of pilot light had gone out.

After Mom left again, Dad kept sleeping in the basement, but otherwise we went along like before. Jennifer talked a lot to Mom on the phone, but we all pretended we didn’t know that. I did too, a couple of times, just to be polite. In August, Dad had the Dodge tuned up and spread Texaco maps out on the kitchen table. We didn’t have the heart for one more trip, but we didn’t have the heart to say no either.

“He thinks he’s doing it for us,” said Jennifer, “so we have to do it for him.” She was going to college in September and already felt gone to me into matter-of-fact adulthood. She didn’t gripe about having to take a week off from the city pool, though I knew she needed the money. I was going to miss a Pony League tournament in Kansas City and was pretty chapped about it.

We headed out north and then west, skirting the Black Hills and plugging away for two days at Montana. Jennifer slept or got a jump on some book she’d have to read in the fall. Dad and I must have talked about something, but mostly we just drove. The trip theme was never announced until we hit our first stop, but I couldn’t remember going this long before the theme kicked in. It was starting to look like we might truck right on through to the Pacific. But somewhere in eastern Washington, we struck west off the highway on a county road through country that looked a lot like what we’d

left a thousand miles behind. After a while, though, you could see fields of potatoes and sugar beets, and we crossed a couple of big irrigation canals. What you didn't see was any houses or cars. Finally, the road hung a right angle south, and now along the fence line were signs reading "Hanford Atomic Reservation: Public Access Prohibited." Behind the fence, the fields still ran off west.

Dad pulled out some government map and drove on slowly until we came up on a dirt track along an irrigation ditch. There was a locked gate, but Dad reached under the seat for a key ring with odd-shaped wires hanging off it. He winked at me like this was a joke and had the lock off in no time. The road peeled off from the ditch, dead-ending maybe half a mile on at the edge of a bluff. At the bottom of the bluff was the Columbia River.

We sat there for a while and nobody got out.

"That's the Columbia River," Dad said finally.

"Sure," I said helpfully. "I remember from Grand Coulee Dam."

Jennifer was reading again and didn't look up.

"There are two ways you could look at this," Dad said thoughtfully. "They need the river to cool the reactors at Hanford. They make the plutonium there. Those two bombs killed a lot of people. Civilians." We had the windows down and you could smell the sage baking, with a clean underscent of water now and then. "I would have been in the invasion. They expected hundreds of thousands of casualties. You could have been not born."

"That's morbid," said Jennifer. She shut her book, then opened it again.

"Also," Dad went on, "this is the Hanford Reach. The last free-flowing piece of the Columbia. Except it's not, really. It just hasn't gone far enough yet. Downstream it hits McNary, and poof." Dad started to make a gesture with both hands, but "poof" didn't seem to be what he was getting at and he let his hands fall back in his lap. "Things happen downstream and it just stops."

"Mom's not coming back," said Jennifer.

Farther along the bluff, where you couldn't see any road at all, a military jeep came slaloming through the sagebrush, a shroud of dust in its wake.

"I expect they'll want us to move along," said my father. "I expect we'll oblige them."