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1

A Leap into the Prairie Sea

IN THE SPRING of 1994, it came time to swim.

For weeks, the smell of redemption floated through windows on sweet western winds. Without my noticing it, every breeze became laced with fragrances of mown hay, cow dung, and dew on willows; perfumes of grass and rain and plowed ground. The ocean-like expanses of prairie promised baptism—a transformed life. When I slept, thunder rumbled through dreams the color of maturing wheat. I only needed a push, however slight, to jump into the grassy sea.

My existence had closed in on me, grown insular and stifling. Repairing furniture and doing general labor in an upscale hotel's engineering department rarely varied. Although I was only thirty-one, a day of adjusting thermostats or buffing chair arms for the wealthy wore me out. I spent evenings parked at the television, wondering what I'd done wrong. I was always getting off work and getting ready for work. Because of this, the Kansas City, Missouri,

I grew up in, with all its grand possibilities, looked and felt smaller at the end of every shift. As spring broke through winter, gray and brown, the city faded into grimy and sinister twilight. I became restless, critical of everything, and cynical about my own bad lot.

Two related and deeply conflicting fears kept me awake at night: Unless I changed, life would mean endless despondency and despair. Change, however, would take me into unknown territory where people like me were consumed by a mean and unforgiving world.

As a part-time single father, I used my daughter, Sydney, as an excuse to avoid taking charge of my own fortunes. Working people have to work, I told myself. I had to have a job. Bills needed to be paid whether I liked it or not: kid, rent, health insurance, and 401k contributions. My worth as a human being lies in endless files of pay stubs and records of taxes paid. Others were responsible for my misery: Sydney and her mom, my parents, my bosses and the companies they worked for, utility companies, landlords, and vast, abstracted hoards of strangers who dressed better, talked better, and lived more comfortable lives than I did. At the same time, I was petrified to think of losing time clocks, balanced checkbooks, and bragging rights based on timely payment of rent and child support. While I yearned for independence from the strictures of working life, I wanted, even needed, to be told what to do.

The contradictions became too heavy to bear. In May 1994 I was painting the floor of the engineering department the same battleship gray I painted it every month. Unmarred paint grew from the edges of the concrete-and-cinder-block room until I stood in a bare, jagged circle of dirty floor. “Nah . . . dammit,” I said, feeling pretty dumb. I stared down at the paint roller, smelled the cold concrete and latex, and ran out of breath. My heart raced and pounded in my ears. A flash of lightning reflected off the door open to the loading dock and trash bins. The rumble of thunder that followed echoed in my chest. A rain-soaked breeze wafted through the steel door. The smell of mown grass and wet dirt cut through the fug of paint, cold metal,

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and garbage. There was a sharp ping in my chest, like the breaking of a spring wound too tightly. I had to act before getting so accustomed to gloom that I would never escape.

That afternoon I stared out my half-opened living-room window. Another thunderstorm set down on the city. Its weight and electricity, its cool, wet breezes felt good. The lightning flashes stirred memories of family vacations when I was growing up. I indulged myself in reflection.

Every year without fail, on a Friday in June or July, my mom, aggravated and harried, would herd my three siblings and me around the house and garage while she loaded our 1965 Dodge Polara station wagon with food, camping gear, and clothes. When dad arrived home from work in the evening, we'd eat a hasty dinner off paper plates and dive into the car to chase sunsets across Kansas. Besides occasionally scolding us for being kids with nothing to do, my dad was quiet and anxious to get across the Kansas plains. To him prairie was enemy of all things civilized. He would drive after sunset to avoid having to look at the expanses he reviled. Flat, ordinary, and "too damned hot," Kansas stood between him and calendar-photo backdrops of mountains, cold streams, and crisp air tinged with the sting of pine resin.

But that drive, repeated throughout my youth, was the most wonderful thing I knew. Sitting at the open window that afternoon, the memory of it haunted me and I ached for it. As we drove and evening fell, my siblings settled into somnambulant stares. Shadows lengthened across the rolling hills of eastern Kansas, giving them uncanny depth and mesmerizing color. Miles flowed by with the low hum of the Polara's V-8 and the tick-tick of rubber bumping over sections of concrete pavement. The Flint Hills' rocky-topped mesas disappeared into night, emerging again in profile against flashes of heat lightning. The stars flecked my parents' dark silhouettes in the green checks and slashes of dashboard lights reflected off the inside of the Polara's long side windows. A stillness filled the car, although the

vehicle rocked and dipped and shook. Tinny voices and country music on the AM radio emerged from magical, insubstantial static. To me the voices sounded like astronauts from distant galaxies called Springfield, Illinois; Johnstown, Pennsylvania; Sedalia, Missouri.

By the time we arrived at a state park near Wilson, Kansas, my father had undergone a transformation even greater than prairie turning into night. He was free from the lonely, windowless, fluorescent-lighted room where he repaired broken cash registers. My family, as a whole, felt his relief. We children were no longer burdens to be endured with a six-pack after a day of tedium. He was jovial and loving, as he was only rarely, if ever, at home.

With happy determination, he erected our family-sized tent from confused bundles of poles, ropes, and canvas. While my dad hummed and whistled, the vacuum of night drew me past the outer ring of lantern light. Surrounded by the smells of grass wet with dew, prairie dust, and bare limestone, I stared into a clear, star-addled sky rimmed with blazes of heat lightning. Later, comfortably wrapped in my sleeping bag, I drifted to sleep, watching the tent light up with those flashes, listening to the sounds of my family sleeping and the cool wind in the grass.

Mornings on those vacations' first days, I stumbled sleepy-eyed into a blue and green and brown world of treeless, rolling hills. The sun shone brighter than at home; the land and sky were as deep and wide as I imagined the ocean to be. Windmills spiked the hills here and there. I stood or sat a little way from the tent and car, and just stared into the space. Too soon dad would scream that it was to leave and mom would herd us back into the car. Once in, my dad drove angrily, as if he couldn't sail us across the open plains and into the mountains fast enough.

I never forgot the feeling of those mornings on the prairie. Once I was old enough to drive, I made prairie journeys when restlessness and fear drove me to frustration and anger. Such trips into the endless expanses began as adventures. The gray-blue dark of a thun-

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derstorm, a blanket of wheat or sunflowers, and the smell of dust and dry grass renewed my spirit and allowed me to imagine new possibilities when I returned to working life. But the wishful and grandiose thinking soon faded to disappointment. Fearing change, I plodded back into routine and lost the hope I'd felt on the road. For a decade and a half, I used these sojourns, long and short, as an addict uses drugs. Respite from the restlessness and fear grew ever briefer. My need to relieve these maladies pressed on me in greater measure. A short overnight or a few days in Gove County, Kansas, or Nebraska's Sandhills might let me weather a few weeks or days of old habit. But I needed more Gove Counties, more Sandhills, and more windmills atop naked hills to sate deepening depressions.

That May afternoon in 1994, I watched rain fall outside my front window and said aloud to myself without thinking, "Helena, Montana." The utterance made sense. Helena was the biggest town farthest across the Great Plains from Kansas City. Though I had only ever seen Helena as a dot on a map, I decided that in one year I would go there—on foot. Taking off across the plains struck me as the right and proper thing to do. I would inundate myself in sky and land. Kansas, Nebraska, and Wyoming, I thought, would show me a way to find a new life.

In an instant, I gained something to strive for, a real, definable goal that seemed possible. My mind raced. I realized that in all my travels, I had only ever seen the Great Plains from a car. Except for those nights between frantic drives to the mountains, I never knew what it was to be in the landscape, a part of it. What I knew of people and towns of the plains, I had gathered from rest stops and gas stations. I wanted to move slower, to feel the distance and lose myself in it. I wanted to know the plains more deeply than from conversations with strangers filling their gas tanks or coffee thermoses. With decent shoes and a backpack I would become familiar with the scenery and its people. I wouldn't hitchhike. I would need no gas stations or

interstates. If offered a ride, I would take it, but no farther than the distance of a day's walk. That was enough.

After the storm, I took Sydney, who was almost three, for a walk down the green, dripping alley behind our house. I told her of my nascent plan and added, as an afterthought, that I might return on the Missouri River in a canoe.

"Why go on a trip, dad?" she said. She was holding my hand, watching cardinals flitter from puddles to trees and back again.

"It makes sense."

"Why?" she said. We stopped to pick a few violets out of the gravel next to the pavement.

"To change things up a little, I guess."

She smiled, cocked her head, and raised her hands, palms up. "I'm happy for you, Dad. When we get home, can I have some candy?"

I felt guilty. She was too young to understand. I would be leaving her for several months. But my desire to escape my self-centered trap outweighed what seemed to be a self-serving expedition. I'd been nudged and had jumped. The journey was already underway.

For the next year, I served banquets at the hotel in the evening after working in the engineering department. I wheedled as much overtime as I could out of my bosses. I calculated how each hour would contribute toward paying child support, day care, rent, and expenses for the five months I thought the trip might take.

Slowly and cautiously, I let my workmates in on my plan. Some discounted the idea outright. Others' eyes lit up when I spoke of what I wanted to do. Without fail, however, they asked questions that filled me with dread. What will you eat? Where will you sleep? What will you do when it rains?

My friend Zaid asked me one day as we were rolling round banquet tables into the ballroom, "So, mister, are you taking a gun on your trip?"

"What for?" The thought hadn't occurred to me.

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“For protection, you know. There’s all kinds of people out there. What happens if you run into someone who wants you or your stuff?” He wrinkled his eyebrows, pursed his lips, and nodded his head. “Oh, yeah; you’ll want to take a gun.”

His question and advice caught me off guard.

“Zaid,” I said finally, “I want to meet people, not shoot them.”

“That’s idiotic,” he said, as he snapped the metal table legs into place and hefted his table upright. He shook his head as he walked away, leaving me alone in the cavernous ballroom.

Zaid was only the first to ask if I would take a gun. Soon it was the first question people asked and the most frequent—before inquiries about why I wanted to go. Abstract criminal hordes, lone stranglers, and sex fiends came to my friends’ minds before wild nature, wild weather, or wildlife. Frankly, I was scared of people *and* nature, but shooting at them didn’t strike me as a way to change life for the better. I would have to deal with my deep-seated fears the same way I would deal with the unknown path I had chosen. I would just have to meet it and see what happened.

From the day the gray paint revealed a sad future if I did not alter its course, I climbed through thick curtains of dread and doubt. Many times only two things kept me going: the fear of not taking the trip and never being able to, and the work of getting things together for the trip. Paying for simple equipment, such as a pack stove, shelter, and boots, demanded more labor at the hotel than just what was needed to cover five months of bills. I arranged through a local retail store and a canoe maker in Maine to get the most expensive items gratis—and suffered uneasy feelings of having asked for others’ charity. I queried hundreds of publications around the country about writing a column or story about the trip. I received only two letters of interest. One was from the editor of a local alternative newspaper who wanted a story and a picture from the road every two weeks. The other was from a national magazine that never returned my reply.

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Meanwhile I tried to get in shape to make the trip, but failed. After long hours at work I lacked the energy to do much else than watch TV and sleep. I decided to get in shape along the way—the dumbest resolution I ever made. Hands down.

Exactly one year after the gray paint, the thunderstorms, and the walk in the alley, I pulled on my backpack and stepped off my front porch, without a gun, into an unknown world.