

PLANE

Gondola

THE AIRCRAFT BOASTED EIGHT PREMIUM accommodations: beige-gray faux leather seats occupied by impractical and indistinguishable tropical-weight wools and silk blends in blue, olive and sand, Armanis and Chanel multitasking toward appointments and obligations, not homes or holidays, to paperwork not pleasure. I sat supposedly-among this supposedly-select sect, an elite corps of chairpersons, presidents and partners that traveled on corporate expense accounts and cellular-phoned as if God granted them exclusive rights to such technology. Unsurprisingly, they suckled Alka-Seltzer as their preferred pastille and slept at rare and opportune moments—on the way to or in between meetings, sitting on subways or lounging in limousines, or, as now, propped uncomfortably upright in first-class cabins of airplanes. I watched them wriggling in their reclined seat, as if restrained by a delicate cocoon attached to the regal cushions for which they paid a pricey surcharge. Lingered near late and expired on alcohol and exhaustion, however, they rested, restless but unfairly fortunate. As for me, the silk necktie of gold and blue concentric squares remained Windsor-knotted at the spread collar of my still-pressed, white linen shirt.

Earlier this August 1994 afternoon, New York City swayed sideways and hazy hot while, in

contrast, the economy charged hotly forward, pushed, in part, by a credit-crazed public. Re-churned Reaganomics had, with only minor deviations, curdled into Clintonomics. The Dow Jones climbed up and unemployment slid down their assigned apparatus in the fickle game of fiscal chutes and ladders. The old world garrison of first class gave way to new order geeks of coach; dot-coms emerged khakied and flannelled while mega-corporations merged unabated, if absorbed. Broadcast narrowed; MTV broadened; Yuppies aged wealthy and without cause while Gen-Xers, proudly poor, whined about their causes. Wavelike opulence spread from the silicon breasts of the Upper East Side to the Birkenstock sandals of Silicon Valley as traders and techies alike rose with the swell. This swell was swallowing my life, a life that somehow tumbled me—with a gale-force warning not to leave—into Gate 12, Terminal 3 at John F. Kennedy Airport.

To me, boarding the plane was to enter an abused child's psychotherapeutic drawing—Botero faces pressed against tiny box windows, Crayola-colored and crazed; agitation repressed by a feigned decorum, the rampart reeking of two hundred anxious armpits wetted in the humidity and the anticipation of escape but soured in the panic of missing the flight. Bronx bullies shouting at ticket agents (my kid *has* to have a window seat), Long Island Lolitas demanding coffee (I *have* to have my latte), Central Park princesses bossing baggage handlers (you *have* to be careful with that) and tired tourists trying to keep up (I *have* to get home) all coalesced into a cacophony of irritating commotion. Headache imminent, I held my sole piece of luggage, a soft, Italian leather garment bag (a fifth anniversary gift from the firm) and my laptop computer cocked high over my head. While the more mature masses jockeyed for the pole position without a scintilla of regard for civil regard, their adolescent dependents groped and pulled to protect their seats as they would a hidden stash of Halloween sugar, their voices vibrating the flat air at frequencies that drowned even the warming 757's twin turbofan engines. Amidst the chaos, I located my eighteen inches of leg room reserved by the firm's travel agent and sat in the last row of the first class cabin, a mere eighteen inches from the first row of the second class cabin. Wearily I watched.

Behind the bulkhead, I perceived parents with progeny cram three by three in order to visit forgotten relatives or trodden recreational areas. They, of course, packed new bathing suits, old golf clubs and cheap paperbacks into expensive luggage stuffed overhead and underneath with expectations that—despite the adults' best efforts—would never materialize. Perhaps these families were flying their flock to the Wonderful World of Disney to magically exchange a

month's remuneration for a single day's escape to Fantasyland, with its photographic memento of Mickey Mouse and quenchless cries of *I wanna go again!* A bargain price for redemption from their secret guilt, I thought. The family of five and the others in coach, behind the proverbial curtain and in seats of laity, also slept undisturbed and unaware. Even they were lucky.

My schedule listed neither the obligations nor the events of either the former or the latter—distinguished by mere drapery—and I was not asleep. A friend was dying, and I was returning to the town of my childhood, neglected and lost somewhere in central Utah, a duty undertaken only due to a disinclined and delayed decision just hours before takeoff. My instincts demanded that I demur, but some recessed impetus erupted, awkward, like an unexpected belch at a business meeting, and prevailed over my pride-produced safety protocols. If not for a four-hour delay in the flight, the window on the statute of limitations would have closed and a judgment would have been entered. With only a few hours, a meandering mind and a guiding guilt, however, I acquiesced.

Time had ticked five and a half years since my prior pilgrimage to the scene of my youth. After succeeding to New York, I reappeared solely for Christmas. I ceased even those Yule-time homages after I married my now ex-wife—she despised the desert and reviled my relatives; besides, convenience convinced me to insinuate ascending the Alps or bathing in St. Bart's, although in reality stationed in neither. Our conjugal misunion never celebrated its second hurrah, but I continued to boycott my birthplace nonetheless. It was a long settled decision. The town was tired, and I stopped pretending otherwise the day after high school graduation when I moved out amid that windstorm. Barely keeping in touch with family and a few friends, I felt somewhat judged, especially now, as I sat on Delta Flight 1424 with fewer than forty-eight hours to elucidate to a dying man my years *in absentia*. But things there had deteriorated, lost cohesion, fell apart somehow, like the wind uprooting that courageous cottonwood tree that had scratched at the screen to my bedroom window or believing in tale tales of Indian lovers. Once you leave, you can never go back, they say. Whoever they are, they are right.

I was reared two thousand miles and a career away from New York City, my preferred place of profession and desired domicile. During my childhood, my father ran the town's only General Store—the only one required. The establishment supplied limited dairy but abundant grains, the ever-essential staples of yeast, flour, sugar, salt and lard, the not-so-essential boxes of Cheerios

and Chips Ahoy, a few fruits and various vegetables when in season, bolts of cloth and spools of thread, quilting needles and framery, livestock feed, hard wares, jars of candy I often raided and whatever else small town folk could not grow themselves or order from the Sears & Roebuck catalogue.

The store faced south at the corner of Center and Main of nothing, the amoebic heart of town. Dark, double doors welcomed patrons to a one-floor, wood-floored, two-story, wood-roofed cosmos of conflict, vainly out-of-place and out-of-time. A shadowed and antiquated space, surrounded as a theater-in-the-round by incongruously modern and eternally half-stocked metal shelving, acting impressive but living incomplete. Stage center, pine tables lined with black tarpaulin bearing drip holes and pans vaunted the veggies and pampered the perishables while surrounding cedar cabinets separated the wools from marauding moths. Expensive glass cases housed worthless kitschy porcelain knickknacks and bawdy wooden bric-a-brac cast or carved into shapes of beavers, bears and butterflies, obvious trappings for tourists who were painfully vacant. Behind the cast-iron, mechanical cash register with prices popping up on yellowing ivory tabs rescued from a fading 1940s soda fountain, perched my father's prized possessions: fishing tackle—rods and reels, lines and sinkers, bait and buoys—all neatly pinned or stacked or shelved, dusted daily and rearranged weekly; flies, tied by the best local fly-tiers, hid in felt-lined boxes, each in its own bed and organized according to its intended catch (*this* one is best for browns, *these* ones over here work for rainbows, *that* one is critical for cutthroat and you must use *those* if you want a walleye). More people stopped by to talk trout than to buy stock, conversing much but buying little. The remaining etceteras my father appropriately partitioned in an attached warehouse, out back and out of public view.

Across the street stood a men's barber and women's salon, providing the expected his and her necessities. Between the two, an open corridor conducted the town's teenagers to a back alley, a wood fence and Mrs. Nelia Lund's garden, boasting the greenest and juiciest—and the simplest to snatch—granny smith apples inside the town proper. The town hall, a single commodious room with laddered pews and a solitary podium, sat kitty-corner (to vent the local vernacular) from my father's business and doubled as the Mormon church on Sundays. Not a fifth of the town's population attended meetings for either function. The remaining business district, four small and inessential, single-story buildings, offered little of interest.

As directed, I often helped my father at the store, after school and during summers. I swept floors, stocked shelves or, on luckier days, loaded goods that arrived by train from Denver, passing just south of town on its way to California.

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“Here it comes, dad, it’s comin’, it’s comin’.” I’m standin’ on the hood a ma dad’s truck. I wanna be first ta see it comin’, even if nobody else’s here. If I look real hard, I kin see it comin’ ‘round the mount-un. It’s neat an’ ma heart’s beatin’ real fast. I kin feel it hittin’ ma chest. I come ta the train depot lots with ma dad. I like ta come see the train an’ wave ta Mick. Mick drives the train an’ he’s real nice.

“That’s it, should be here in about ten minutes. Are you ready, William?” ma dad asks ta me.

Ma dad’s sittin’ in the cab a the truck with the door open an’ his legs hangin’ ta the outside. Standin’ on the hood a the blue truck an’ lookin’ ta where Colorado’s at, I kin see the black smoke ‘round the far mount-uns, just past the apple orchards. I love waitin’ fer the train ta come in. Pacific Southwestern’s what ma dad calls it, an’ it’s got a huge black engine an’ looks real old. It’s neat. The engineer’s name’s Mick an’ he always blows the horn just fer me when he pulls into the station.

“William, what’s the engine car called?” ma dad asks ta me.

“The locomotive!” I says. Ma dad always learns me questions ‘bout the trains. He learns me lotsa questions ‘bout lotsa things.

“What do the cows and horses travel in?”

“The stock cars, ya kin see the noses stickin’ out as they go past.”

“And what do they ship wheat in?”

I can’t think right ‘way what this one is. I know it. I think harder an’ ma dad looks ta me.

“This is an easy one, you should know it.”

I keep thinkin’. “The hopper!” I yell. I’m very happy I got it. It was hard fer me ta think a that one.

“That was easy, William. What about the cars that bring supplies?”

“They’re boxcars, they got boxes in ‘em an’ they look like a box.” That one I know really well ‘cause it’s the car our stuff comes in.

“They *have* boxes in them. What kind carries gasoline?”

“The tank car. It looks like a big, black tube,” I says ta ma dad. I’m smilin’ that I got it right an’ not havin’ ta think.

“And, what do they call the ones without tops?”

I always ferget this one. It’s a hard one. Ma dad always has ta tell me it. I squeeze ma eyes, but I can’t think a it. I kin see how the car looks like, but I can’t remember the dumb name. It’s sum-un that begins with G.

“I’m not going to tell you this time,” ma dad says. “I’ve told you a million times. You have to remember it on your own. You have to *think*.”

I try harder ta think a the name a the car. It’s a really hard name an’ I never think a it. Ma dad looks ta me. I wanna remember the name, but I just can’t. I wanna think a it on ma own, too. I try even harder ta tell the name a the car. I open ma mouth but nut-un’ comes out, like that time when I woked up after sleep walkin’ and couldn’t scream. It felt like a ball stuck down ma throat. That’s what it feels like now. Ma throat’s all dry. Then, I kin hear a horn blowin’.

“It’s here, it’s here, it’s here.” I ferget all ‘bout the name a the car an’ I jump up an’ down on the hood a the truck. Ma dad says these old Fords’re tough as nails, an’ I don’t hurt the car. Ma dad reaches up an’ grabs me under the arms an’ lets me ta the ground. It hurts a little ‘cause he’s strong an’ I’m only eight years old. “Can I go see Mick, please? Ya said last time I could go in the engine car with Mick.”

“The locomotive, and no, not today. Besides, Mick is in a hurry. He has a lot of other stops to make,” ma dad says an’ puts his hand on ma shoulder, leadin’ me over ta the depot.

I wish I could see Mick, but I know he’s very busy. I remember when ma dad says ta me that the train, after stoppin’ here, it keeps goin’ west. It goes into the valley ta the other side a the big mount-un, then goes south. It goes ta Las Vegas an’ then ta Los Angeles where there’re lotsa people who need food an’ supplies, too. We can’t keep ‘em waitin’, he always says ta me.

The depot’s real tiny an’ made a wood. Some a the pieces do like a teeter-toter when I walk on ‘em. But it’s got a metal roof that’s kind a crook’d. There’s a bench ta one side, but that’s it. It looks really run down, like it might be fallin’ over any minute, but it never does. We’re it that’s here. There ain’t never nobody else here. Ma dad says there used ta be lotsa people, back in the old days. The train stops long ‘nough fer us ta unload the supplies. Me an’ ma dad lifts boxes a nails an’ coffee. I take the smaller ones ‘cause they ain’t as heavy. There’re some small

bags filled with spools a yarn, just like grandma's. These ain't very heavy an' I kin take most a 'em. I kin carry two at a time an' there're ten bags in all. That's only five carries! We're doin' math with Mrs. Stemples now, an' I'm the best in our class.

I run back an' forth. I run faster 'an ma dad, but he's got ta carry the heavy things an' straighten 'em in the back a the truck and write on a piece a paper, he calls 'em orders. I run as fast as I can. I kin be a big help an' like ta work real hard. When I'm carryin' the yarn, I hafta waddle a little when I'm walkin'. I look like a duck. I hafta pull-up ma shoulders ta keep the bags from scrapin' the ground, an' this makes me walk funny. It's like I'm almost tippin' ta one side than th'other.

There're all colors a yarn, like white, orange, some greens and blues, pink, red an' even black. I ain't never seen anythin' made outta black yarn 'fore. I don't know who buys it neither. I think it's ugly. The yarn's wrapped 'round these cardboard tubes. 'Fore grandma uses 'em, she rolls 'em inta balls. She says it's easier that way 'cause there're less tangles. She makes lotsa things fer me an' Emily. We git knitted slippers every year fer Christmas. Sum-times, the colors're ugly, like brown and orange together, but they're real warm in the winter. We gitta run all over the house in 'em an' slide on the floors. Emily's got a pink an' white blanket when she was just a baby. It's still ta the bottom a her bed. I got one too, when I was born, but mom had ta throw it away 'cause it got old an' dirty, she said.

I hafta drop the bags a yarn by the back a the truck. Then I lift 'em one at a time ont a the truck's door that folds down an' push 'em as far as I can. That ain't very far. Ma dad'll hafta move 'em 'round later. Sum-times, when it rains, we come in the white delivery truck. It looks like a milk truck an' gots a roof over the back so things don't get wet. Ma dad don't drive it very much, I don't know why not. I can't reach into the back a the delivery truck at all. I hafta stand in the rain an' lift things up ta ma dad who's inside. I get soakin' wet, but I like it in the summer. When it's cold, mom gets mad at me an' says I'll catch a death a cold. I haven't even been sick once, well, I guess only one time.

When I'm done with the bags a yarn, I'm sweatin', but not lots. It's spring an' the air's still kind a cold. It'll be hot when it gits summer time and then I kin go fishin'. "I got all the yarn," I says wipin' ma forehead with the back a ma hand, like the farmers that've been workin' all day in the sun. Then I stand with ma hands ta ma sides, copyin' a picture a Peter Pan I saw in a book that ma mom reads ta me.

“There are couple of small, brown boxes still in the boxcar. You’re strong enough to bring them in one trip. Then, tell Mick were done. We need to get back to the store.”

I do as I’m told. I always do. On ma way back ta the truck, I put the boxes down an’ wave ta Mick. He’s leanin’ outta the window in the black engine. There’s sum-one else with him inside, but I don’t know who that is. There’s smoke comin’ outta the sides. It look likes clouds. The engine must still be turned on. Mick blows the horn an’ waves good-bye, smilin’ ta me. It’d be funner ta go with him than stay here, I think ta maself.

I wanna be an engineer, I think when I’m walkin’ back ta the truck. I think how fun it’d be ta travel all over the place an’ talk ta new people. I could blow the horn fer the other kids when I stopped by their towns. I’d deliver food an’ clothes ta people who needed ‘em. I wanna go ta Las Vegas or Los Angeles. I wonder if they’re as big as Salt Lake City. I been there a coupla times, but nowhere else really, other than ma town.

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GONDOLA. I NEVER FORGOT THAT word. Gondola. The train car sans roof. Through high school and college I would write, type, scribble and scratch on text books and phone books and into bar tops and desk tops that enigmatic emblem of my adolescence. I wrote it in blunt-leaded block print or fine-tipped scrawling script, in small caps or large letters, with or without shadows or serifs, always with ink, usually in black, rarely in jest and never with a smiley face in the Os. Gondola.

Erectly arranged in my seat by the aisle, jacket neatly stored and collar tightly buttoned, I suddenly sensed a rising warmth in the first class cabin on the last direct flight from NYC, NY to SLC, UT. The drier air of the aircraft did not dissipate the damper day I had reluctantly left back on the island of Manhattan. My chest had just begun to moisten with perspiration when the lug next to me, roaring with rhinitis and leaning against the window, awoke and silently stared at my fingers etching letters onto the pasty pale skin of my thigh through the dark blue wool of my trousers. Luckily, he lapped at a lip, sniffed, swallowed and passed out again. Of course, only I knew that I was lacerating the shibboleth from my childhood into my leg. I brushed my pants as if to erase the letters like on an Etch-a-Sketch pad. It would likely reappear before the end of the flight.

Still smoothing, a flight attendant approached, calling me Mr. Daniels in an unimpressive attempt to impress me by remembering my name from the passenger list and as if he expected a gratuity for having done so. He had unfortunately noticed that I was the only one in first class without a cocktail-encouraged comatosity. I quickly removed my hand from my leg and gently placed it on the armrest as he knelt in preparation for his rehearsed query. In the polite whisper taught in flight schools and Sunday schools, he inquired about my comfort and need for refreshment.

“Fine. Just water. Thank you,” I replied.

A quick pause of consternation combed over his face as he pondered the obliquely obvious distinction from my cabin-mates. Despite any assumption, however, I had stopped drinking without the aid of AA or any other new-age, mantra-chanting, overly-acronymed, self-help fad. I quit shortly after the divorce, cold-turkey as they say, without a single buzz from a swarm of wanna-be wagon-riders. I stopped drinking before diving to the depths of being a drunkard. Intelligently, I had realized the insidiousness of the indulgence near the end of my marriage, my second major failure in life, with a touch of closure because the drinking had begun after my first major failure in life. Alcohol had been alleviating, for both, for awhile.

When the attendant returned with a small bottle of Evian, I lifted the meal tray from under the arm rest and politely placed the clear container in the center, careful not to disturb the phlegmy boar in 2A with his wing-tipped Johnston Murphy shoes kicked off, one lying on my side of the nonexistent spatial dividing line. The perspiring plastic bottle moistened the pink and blue label, just beginning to peel away from the corner. As I gently touched the wet paper, pushing the moisture deeper into the fibers and turning the colors a deeper red and violet, a saltier moisture began to form on my forehead. Suddenly, the tightness of the air seemed as confining as the cabin and the silence as irritating as the jet engine roaring in my left ear. I raised my right arm and rotated the small knob on the panel above my head. Cool air spilled out past the yellow and orange fasten seat belts and no smoking warning lights. I, at last, loosened the knot in my silk tie and unbuttoned the collar my custom dress shirt. I reclined the seatback and allowed my head to rest against the cushion. Staring at the reading light, I realized that sleep was not imminent. An old steam locomotive and dilapidated depot preoccupied my mind.

A railroad engineer? An ambition deficiency! Evidently, I had received a limited exposure to career opportunities; I had received a limited exposure, period. Television broadcast reception

did not reach the town until I reached high school, away from town. Even then, only one snow-filled channel crackled with the constant adjustment of the antennae. *I Love Lucy* and *My Three Sons*, the Cleavers and the Bradys, *Giligan's Island* and *Gomer Pyle*: reruns were first-runs in my town. I studied astronauts with Mrs. Stemples but never saw them on the small screen. Neil Armstrong's booted foot imprinted the dust on the moon's surface as my bared foot splashed in the water of the town's river. Woodstock had lost its wonder by the time Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin first sent amplitude modulations over the mountain shadowing the town. My only musical memories were of Frank Sinatra and Rosemary Clooney crooning from the town's only record player, located as it so happened in our living room. The town's vernacular never included groovy, far-out, or cool. Job lists posted at the Town Hall did not even include the position of paperboy. (I would not perused my first periodical until college.) Vietnam, Watergate and OPEC passed not as current events in a newspaper or chapter titles in a textbook but rather as faint footnotes to my childhood.

Time passed. Events passed. Some things passed less and less—my father and I by the old depot, the train by our town.

My grandfather had a supplier in Denver who always shipped by rail. They had been friends for decades. Although shipping by rail took longer and cost more, my grandfather insisted on maintaining that relationship. "A good friendship is the profit from a bad business," he insisted. The relationship eventually died with my grandfather. By the time I matriculated on to the University of Utah, Mick and the lumbering locomotive were a distant memory, being relegated to the collection of my grandfather's historicies. He often related the story of "driving the golden spike" to complete in the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 in Promontory, Utah where the Central Pacific from the west joined the Union Pacific from the east in the then-greatest achievement of US transportation—an achievement also plagued by land grabs, fierce competition, wasted efforts and erroneous reporting, erroneous right down to my own high school history book. The last railcar passed through Promontory in ages past. Then in 1965 the federal government decared the neglected locale a national historic site to commemorate its history. History. The need had passed.

As time passed in my town, combines harvested the wheat and individuals combined to store it. One farm became two which became four and then eight. When eight became unmanageable, cooperatives of local farmers cropped up to manage the crops. When coops became

unmanageable, conglomerates cashed in to manage the cooperatives. And so on, passing. Trucks shipped indigenous produce out and foreign produce in. Johnny reds picked in the eastern orchards passed by my father's store en route to California while he polished the imported Oregon Fujis placed neatly inside the double doors. If there had been some logic or consistency to these goods and services passing through, the town may have become a credible crossroads. The town never became anything.

Living there, and then, and too young to resolve the inefficiencies of our small town's supply and demand disequilibrium, I created a fantasy world, learning to fabricate stories from my grandfather, whose anecdotes had provided the sole source of entertainment at birthday parties, holidays and family reunions. He told fanciful histories of the origins of our humble town, or absurd adventures of Indian warriors who conquered lands and lovers. Sitting on our front stoop or cuddling under the cottonwood tree out back, my grandfather's imagination was never exhausted. The cold smell of the river that ran around our house, the darkening of the sky over the crest of Mt. Ketchua, the bite of bittersweet lemonade squeezed by my grandmother, the cushion of limp leaves in the early fall, and the sound of the branches scratching at my bedroom window supplied the sensory details to enliven his stories and imprint on me a predisposition to daydream.

This plague of pondering on the lives of others took form on the family of five I eyed earlier waiting in the terminal at Kennedy Airport. The father and mother appeared my own age, or perhaps a bit older. He wore pressed and unfaded Polo jeans, a pressed, white Polo oxford, collar and cuffs buttoned-down, with the blue horse and rider insignia intentionally displayed on the left breast. More matching horses with riders remained hidden. He looped a long, woven leather belt around himself, the extra length hanging with intention against his left thigh. Below the one-inch upturned cuff, his new Timberland loafers, the style with the heavy lug sole, intentionally added with intention another inch to his short stature. He presented the clean, rugged look of the nineties-new preppie handbook, now titled the Abercrombie and Fitch Catalogue.

His dear wife's dress certainly cost his wallet dearly. The fair-colored linen sundress, only faintly darker than the fair complexion of her exposed shoulders, hung tightly through the body and loosely below the waist. Two simple straps pulled her breasts to the perfect position. Her blonde hair, straight and shiny, rested gently against her bare back. A simple, gold braided necklace. She equaled her husband's stature, even in her espadrilles. Being products of regal

genetic engineering, they were attractive, from which they produced more attractive products, and so on, ad infinitum. The three children, between the ages of five and ten I surmised, obediently soldiered behind their distracted leaders. The mother dressed the older two girls in matching, pale blue Laura Ashley dresses and the younger boy in jeans shorts from the Gap and a short-sleeved shirt, lacking the costly emblem but matching the color of his father's. They appeared as the ideal family of modern suburbia—a would-be Norman Rockwell original, had he lived to paint in the nineties.

I imagined the father to be a top-end manager or a low-level executive at a large corporation, like IBM or GE. He made very good money, perhaps a few bills under two-hundred thousand which he earnestly employed to purchase a home and raise a family in the suburbs of New York City, probably Scarsdale or New Canaan. I had to assume a brick, two story colonial home, standard for most upper class neighborhoods lining the eastern coastline, nothing original, just grand: deep red masonry and slate-gray wooden shutters framing each multi-paned window. A small portico with pillars shaded the slate-gray front door brandishing a polished, brass knocker at its center. In the spring, rhododendrons bloomed on either side of the entry. Neighbors envied their large, purple blossoms. However, they had grown too large and displaced the symmetry of the home. Despite his requests to his wife and due to his own reticence to yard care, the bushes remained untouched. In the summer a fabulous front yard undulated like an emerald carpet billowing on a clothesline, falling away from the home and down to the street in a personified way to complicate the climb to the front door. A bean-shaped pool with dark blue tiles and a white gazebo in the back yard were the stage for numerous summer parties. No need existed for a vacation with a home like this—except that they possessed the discretionary income, and everyone else vacationed. They were sublime subscribers to what economists call conspicuous consumption.

As I further figured their lives, father commuted by train into the city for work each morning and commuted by a red, 300-class Mercedes, an early mid-life crisis purchase, to the country club for golf on the weekends. Everyday, mother drove her children in a green, Volvo 850 station wagon to ballet classes and piano lessons, to shopping malls and sleepovers. Mother had high expectations for her children. In time, the young man will be playing soccer, and she will have to become more efficient in her after-school schedule. She often wondered if she could accomplish all that she must in order to create accomplished children.

The family of five boarded first with the first-class passengers: young children, he told the flight attendant checking boarding passes and carry-ons. Without a glance, the father promenaded his family onto the plane with presumed and not-so-accustomed privilege, ignoring the flight personnel and other passengers. I stood to the side as they passed, wondering if the father ignored his family as well. With a look of disgust sitting in coach, the father called the flight attendant for a drink. With embarrassment his wife attended to the children. With bravura the kids dove into a bag of electronic games, Sony Walkman cassette players, reading books and dress-up dolls. Easily bought-off, I thought. Regardless of how I imagined their lives, however, they seemed happy. They were headed on a vacation. And I was not.

The town to which I was headed, and everything in it, cowered in the northwest corner of one small valley formed by two large mountain ranges. On the western edge loomed the ridges and unclimbable cliffs of Mt. Ketchua, looking like a frozen waterfall of stone and slate. Ketchua was an Indian name, and as children we called it Mt. Ketchup, a juvenile attempt at jocularity. The near-vertical face, scratched and scarred by the fingernails of wind, appeared to abut the sky, spitting off clouds from its springtime glaciers. The soaring ridgeline, blocking the setting sun, cast an early and sheltering shadow over our tired town. Along the behemoth's base ran a river that silently spilled out of Stone Canyon, a more hospitable hike into the more meager mountains to the north. An anastomosis of tanned trails threading through dark forests and green streams pooling into blue bruises covered these lesser mountains, a playground once familiar to me that had long since blurred in my mind, having been replaced by the rectangular, gray grid of Manhattan.

Once freed from the canyon, the river rolled in a crescent around Hobb's Hill and my family's home. The hill had been named after Henry Hobbs, the town's founding father. His home also sat upon the rise, unoccupied since his death which happened years before my birth. My grandfather, Henry's best friend, built our home from brick and brawn, still occupied by my parents and sister. Two unimpressive stories, a simple porch and a yard yearning for attention could not command the attention of the family of five's home. But in my youth, convenient access to the nearby stream for fishing and Stone Canyon for hiking, and the giant cottonwood out back for climbing were the only important appurtenances to our home.

Below us, the town proper occupied a mere forty square blocks, the majority of its residents relegated to occupying the tens of thousands of acres of farmland to the east and south. Despite

the distance and space, however, everyone knew one another. Rumors did not circulate, accurate information flowed from home to home as quickly as the river flowed through the town. To the east and beyond town, apple orchards blanketed the valley, and beyond them, the far mountains, and beyond them, Colorado. It was from those far, eastern mountains that I awaited Mick's arrival. Below town and to the south, wallowed wheat farms, cattle ranches, and uninhabited grasslands, interrupted only by Interstate 70 as it connected Colorado to California.

Carter MacKay lived and labored on one of those farms south of town. Conforming to the country code of conduct, his provincial parents raised only crops and children, specifically wheat and eight children whose names all began with the letter C. Carter, the oldest C, Spencer Reed and I, all of us born in the same year, subsequently bonded as best friends. We fished in the river by my parent's home, rode horses around the MacKay's fields, shot guns that Spencer somehow acquired, and inevitably encountered trouble. Actually, Spencer encountered trouble, and I exonerated him, practice for my current practice.

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