On Becoming American

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the first time I heard my dad say fuck we were driving through Utah in a rented Winnebago. I was twelve, and my dad believed I was ready to learn what it meant to be an American; he believed I was ready to see for myself the realities of the homeland I'd soaked up through the TV and read about in 6th grade History class. So he rented a Winnebago and drove my mom and me west from Detroit toward San Francisco. Out into the sideways glances of the archetypal cross-country family road-trip. Out into the landscape of the American Dream.

My dad had already been around a lot by then. He was often gone, traveling much of the country and some of the world on business trips as an auto exec. Our home on Lakeshore Drive in Grosse Poine Shores said it all: he was a damn good auto industry PR man. He knew celebrities, spoke at auto shows, and would eventually become responsible for the global public image of a company worth billions of dollars. Though I didn't get to see him as much as I would have liked, he was what some would call an ideal father. Like many fathers, he'd shown his son a few things about walking it off and throwing spirals, but he'd also driven me around the track at Daytona in the official pace car at over 120 mph; he'd brought me down into the pits and introduced me to Richard Petty and Dale Earnhardt. Maybe he wasn't there to tuck me in every night or watch me dive into that first crash landing the day I took the training wheels off my bike, but he got me a seat in 15th row between the checkered flag and the fourth turn, and when Richard Petty nailed the wall, sending a tire spinning into the stands, he worried his way down from the press box to make sure I was okay. Now I was spending three entire weeks him, and I was glad for it, even though so much time together was something neither of us was used to.

As far as I knew back then, my dad had grown up happy in a large, lower middle class Irish Catholic family, the youngest son of nine children born to an immigrant newspaper printer and his wife. His was a 1930's childhood of ice trucks and milkmen, sandlot baseball teams, and a "sheeny" as everyone in the neighborhood called him: a wizened old Jewish man drawing a horse cart down the back alley to a thickly accented mantra of "Pots mended. Knives sharpened." In the family photo album there was a black and white picture of my dad in knickers, another of him in a cowboy outfit—complete with chaps and cap guns and spurs—sitting on the back of a shaggy, spotted pony. Once, while flipping through that album, I noticed the edge of another picture behind his navy portrait and slid it out. In this picture he's sitting inside a nightclub somewhere dressed in his navy whites. He's rail thin and smiling thickly. His eyes are heavy-lidded,
and his face shiny with sweat. His acne tells me he's probably not even twenty, but there he is, leaning toward the small, round, bottle-littered table along with two of his buddies, all of them frozen in the middle of a having a sloppy good time.

"That was Hawaii near the end of WWII, years before I met your mother," he said when I asked him about it. "A bunch of jarheads came in later, started calling us mate-a-lots and deck monkeys. We ended up breaking the place apart and getting tossed out." He handed the picture back to me.

"Same night I got this," he said, pointing to a short, faded scar above his left eyebrow. "Courtesy of Budweiser."

Nearly fifty in the mid 1970's, he was the archetypal self-made man ready to serve up America to a son born late in his life, that naïve little kid in the windowed sleeper above the Winnebago's cab whose biggest problems were worrying about when his walkman batteries were going to die and finding back issues of CONAN and Sgt. Fury and the Howling Commandos.

It was early August when we left the suburbs of Detroit. We rolled past Chicago, bridged the Mississippi and shot across the great plains, driving through Davenport, Des Moines, and Sioux City before climbing into the Black Hills and the Badlands to find the icons blasted onto the face of Mt. Rushmore. Along the way, I could see that it was true: majestic purple mountains anchored the horizon beyond endless seas of corn; there really were amber waves of grain switching in the wind beneath spacious skies. But there were also sun-blasted reservation trailers orbited by chained dogs carving dry moats into baked dirt yards and the remnants of dead towns where the skeletons of stripped cars and abandoned buildings clung to the stem of the road like shriveled fruit. From the things he told me, it seemed my dad wanted me to notice this as well. "It's a damn shame the way those people live," he'd said as we passed a drunken Indian staggering along the shoulder of a two-lane highway that marked the border of a reservation. What didn't occur to me at the time was to ask him who he thought was to blame.

We continued west toward San Francisco: I leaned my stomach against the iron railing and peered down into the vast, incomprehensible pit of the Grand Canyon. I stood in a knot of tourists and watched Old Faithful go off like clockwork in Yellowstone. I drowsed, gazing out the sleeper windows at rose-tinted rock formations filling with deep pools of shadow in the late afternoon sun that day we descended into Salt Lake City and stopped at a light in the middle of downtown.

My dad had just finished explaining the religious subtleties of the Mormons to me. "Do they really get to have more than one wife? How come they wear an undershirt all the time?" These were the stupid questions I'd asked in those last uncomplicated minutes before three guys in a yellow, souped-up Caddy revved it loud enough to make it hard to hear.

"What the fuck's with the engine. His two tattoos pocked the toothpick. My dad leaned toward the passenger seat, pointed a stiff finger to say something and pressed hard on it.

"Fuck you, come on," he stomped on the fishtail and shook the rubber. White-hot sun it a bit too hard and threw him a near-deadly stare.

"What the hell do you give those guys?"

"I didn't say anything at me."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am."

"Well what the hell do you give him?"

"I didn't give him anything."

"Well quit lying."

We passed through ourselves back to Las Vegas. I no longer trying to figure out for no apparent reason that way. I tried to concentrate on them stronger. I fantasized them down one by one as they built up the Winnebago not talking about war.
probably not even
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I no longer had the stomach for
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Las Vegas. I no longer had the
ing out to CONAN and Sgt. Fury, but I just couldn't
concentrate on who was killing who or why. I kept wishing I was older,
stronger. I fantasized about beating the crap out of those guys, throwing
them down one at a time at my mother's feet and standing over each of
them as they begged her forgiveness. There was an ugly tension in the
Winnebago now; we all seemed angry at intangibles, and we weren't
talking about why.

After some time, I got up from the dinette and went to my mom. I stood
there next to her chair as the soft, warm pastels of the sunset-splashed sky
came at us through the Winnebago's gigantic windshield.
"Are you okay, mom?" I put my hand on her shoulder. "Those guys were jerks. They shouldn't have talked to you like that. Nobody should talk to you like that."

"Patrick, you're not supposed to be walking around while we're moving," my dad said. "Sit down and put your seatbelt on."

It was the first I'd heard of that. For the last two weeks I'd been walking all over the place while were driving, climbing up and down from the sleeper, sitting at the dinette table, going to the bathroom, getting iced teas out of the fridge for my dad.

"But you never said..."

"I said sit down and look at the scenery. There's lots of beautiful country around here. What am I doing all this driving for if you're not going to pay attention to what's going on out there?"

My mom put her hand over mine. "Do as your father says, honey. I'm fine. Some people are just rude, that's all. I feel sorry for them."

I sat down at the dinette table strewn with my comics, walkman, and cassette tapes and felt between the cushions for the straps of the lap belt. Utah scrolled past, darkening. I wondered how a place that had looked so spectacular to me only a few hours before could suddenly seem so alien and desolate.

Somewhere after the town of Spanish Fork the flow of traffic slowed to a crawl as all of the southbound lanes were directed to the shoulder. A seemingly endless line of cars stretched away from us to the horizon. My dad started grumbling and kept asking me to refill his glass of iced tea from the plastic gallon jug in the fridge. He didn't seem bothered by the fact that I had to get up and walk around to do so.

The jug was nearly empty by the time we reached the cause of the jam: one car pushed up tightly against the rear end of another, a third skidded sideways a little farther down the road. All in all it wasn't much. No spider-webbed windshields. No crushed trunks. No accordioned front ends. It didn't look like something that should take so long get around or move, but there was still no tow-truck in sight. By the time we pulled even with the single, sweating cop directing traffic around the wreck my dad was frustrated enough to say something about the situation.

"This is ridiculous," he told the cop. "What's taking so long to clear the road?"

"People like you slowing down to ask me questions," the cop said. "Keep it moving."

Hours later, a big bump startled me awake into the darkness. On my stomach, looking out the sleeper's front window, I listened to comic book pages rustling in the wind and wondered where we were. I had no idea what time it was, but the road was empty, and the air felt late. My parents were talking between the hostility.

"Francis, what the fuck?!"

"Just go in Christ's sake."

"You know we need to..."

"Way behind us," the cop said. "Let's jacked up on c..."

"Go lie down."

"You're being jacked up on..."

"Keep it moving."

"Okay, fine:"

"Bunch of g..."

"Lying there wasn't happenin'"

"Sure they fou..."

"I didn't stare out the window..."

"Oh shit, I'm jacked up like monsters that s..."

"Finally, after..."

"Come to mean the Nevada border..."

"Francis!"

Silence. We comes to..."

"Francis!"

"Francis!"

"Francis! Can't..."

"FUCK! Jee..."

The motor..."
I'd been walking down from the mountain, getting iced tea to warm desert wind through the open windows. The Winnebago's wheels thumping lightly over flaws in the road.

"Francis!"

Silence. Warm desert wind through the open windows. The Winnebago's wheels thumping lightly over flaws in the road.

"Francis!"

"Francis!"

"Francis! Can we stop driving?!"

"FUCK! Jesus! Alright, fine!" he shouted. "Just quit with your bitching!"

The motor home rattled and shook as my dad pulled immediately to the side of the empty two-lane road and slammed it into Park. I could feel
his weight shifting around in the front seat as he threw off his seatbelt and sat there swearing at my mom under his breath. I shoved my face into my pillow, felt it grow wet against my cheeks. I couldn't understand why he didn't just pull off the road miles ago like she'd asked. She really did have motion sickness; she got sick on airplanes and when they went on cruises. Even I knew that. Obviously something tremendous and irrevocable had gone wrong with all our lives. It was as if that Mustang driver's words had somehow infected us and made my mom and dad hate each other. Why else would they talk to each other that way? It was obvious to me: we would turn around tomorrow and drive back home so they could get divorced.

My dad stood up. His heavy steps shook the motor home as he stamped toward the bed in the back where my mom lay in silence. Again the curtain hissed open and closed, and I was afraid for what would happen between them next, though I had no idea what that might be.

For some time there was only the engine ticking and the creaks of the Winnebago settling. Then came the low words as my parents stared talking, and finally, my mother sharply saying, "No." My dad pushed angrily through the curtain. He opened the side door, closed it firmly then keyed it locked behind him. His feet crunched into the shoulder gravel. Through the sleeper's front window I watched his silhouette disappearing into the night as he headed up the road toward a bar with a red neon sign flashing Spanky's. It took me a long time to convince myself that he had to come back for us eventually.

I don't know how many motorcycles roared past us before I woke up, but after one, then another, and another, and another, and another, and another shook the Winnebago, I finally rolled over and looked out the sleeper window. The parking lot of Spanky's was filled with motorcycles glinting in the glow of a low and gigantic desert moon. More bikes than I could count leaned beneath the building's floodlights in a long, gleaming line stretching away from the front door. Outlaws, violent, barbaric, greasy looking men in heavy boots, torn jeans and black leather jackets stalked around drinking beer, laughing, yelling, slapping at the asses of the women who kept walking in and out of the bar with armloads of bottles. They were popping wheelies, racing all over the place, clouds rising in whirls as they cut tight circles in the dust: it was mesmerizing, the most amazing and terrifying thing I'd ever seen.

At the far end of the line of motorcycles, a knot of people gathered around something. They were shouting, cheering someone on, pressing inward. It was hard to tell from a distance, but it looked like a fight, an accelerated version of the schoolyard squabbles I knew too well from being a chubby kid whose name happened to rhyme with fat: two people struggling on top of each other, threatening at them a fist, a dad's red shirt chest, climbing, binoculars my close-up view.

My dad was already up close, of a biker bar, I thought was, "What's this something, the way he snorted, being able to control those bikers to the bar? Would this be like this something, the time between an idea, but one that I had let side door and was almost always who needed saved?

I had to wish the Winnebago into the fire extinguisher, dad and pulling the fire fighter of bikers hot a CB radio. I could hear his son. There was nothing that I was, throwing those bikers who needed to apologize to my mom, her that he loved away from the fight?

"What is good?"

"We have to leap down and it."

"It's just so."

I edged one sitting at the counter, a can in his hand.

"Just some."

"I have been."

"Well, what."

"What's the.
struggling on the ground, or maybe one person on top of another, lunging at them again and again. I caught what looked like a flash of my dad's red shirt, or maybe it was blood, and my heart knocked loose in my chest, climbing up into my throat as I groped around in the dark for the binoculars my dad given me at the beginning of the trip so I could get a close-up view of the real America.

My dad was being beaten to death by a bunch of bikers out in front of a biker bar a few miles north of the Nevada border, and all I could think was, "What has he done now?" Had he snapped at one of them the way he snapped at my mom because he was still pissed off about not being able to come to her defense in Salt Lake City? Had he told one of those bikers to fuck off when they'd gotten in his face for being in their bar? Would they come after us once they finished with him? Was all of this something we had coming because of what we did or didn't do in the time between the Mustang driver's hateful words and now? I had no idea, but one thing seemed clear: the man who'd locked the Winnebago's side door and stormed off into the night was not the tall, calm dad who almost always came home from his office whistling. He was someone who needed saving.

I had to wake up my mom. In a flash I saw her smashing the Winnebago into the crowd of them. Saw myself jumping out the side door with the fire extinguisher and spraying it in their faces as I grabbed my bloody dad and pulled him back in. I imagined us peeling out of there, hundreds of bikers hot on our tail as we tried to get in touch with the cops on the CB radio. I could see my dad thanking me, telling me he was proud of his son. There I was, bringing him a towel to help stop the blood. There I was, throwing things out the Winnebago's windows in hopes of seeing those bikers wad themselves into a tangled wreck in our wake. He would apologize to my mom, say he was sorry for yelling and swearing and tell her that he loved her. I started shaking. They were killing him. I turned away from the window to call out.

"What is going on out there?" my mother said from the back.

"We have to save him!" I was about to tear aside the sleeper curtains, leap down and shout it when I heard my dad's annoyed, tired voice.

"It's just some guys on bikes, Teresa."

I edged one of the curtains aside and looked through the gap. He was sitting at the dinette table in the dark, part of a six-pack near his elbow, a can in his hand.

"Just some guys on bikes? Francis, look out the window."

"I have been."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"What's there to do? It's a free country."
My mom hurried up from the back. She stood over him at the table in her nightgown, "There is no way in hell we're staying here."

My dad drained his beer and set it down. He stared out the window at the bikers, considering, then gave a heavy exhale as if trying to let something go. He pushed himself up from the table, hooked his fingers through the empty loops of the six-pack and carried it with him toward the captain's chair, my mom following behind him, whispering something at the back of his head. I couldn't quite make out what they were saying to each other over the revving engines and shouts as they strapped themselves in. Sharp things, hushed and minimal. I think they wanted to believe that somehow I was sleeping through it all. My dad turned the engine over, mashed it into Drive, and we spilled from the shoulder back onto the road.

The sweaty, prickling shocks of adrenaline still ran through me as I tried my best to tamp down my tears of relief. Nearing the bar, it became clear the knot of shouting people was circled around a man and a woman writhing on the ground. She was on top of him, bobbing up and down, naked in the warm night except for a red bandanna wrapped around her head, her long bleach-blonde hair spilling out the back of it.

"Oh, my God," my mom gasped. "We have to call the police."

"Looked like she was enjoying herself to me."

"What! What did you say?"

"I said it's none of our business."

"Francis!"

"Okay. Okay. Fine. I'll see if I can raise somebody on the CB."

As we passed the crowd, I locked eyes with a shirtless man at the outer edge of the circle. He had a giant eagle tattooed across his chest. He raised his bottle when we roared by, thrust out his waggling tongue from a mouth missing more than a few teeth. I must have seemed like something from another world to him, dumb little kid in a camper, shock stitched across my pale, tear-streaked face, my hands pressed up against the glass like a horrified prisoner being taken away for good.

My mom and dad were still being short with each other the next day as we walked through the gaudy chaos of Caesar's Palace. This trip to the casino wasn't about my dad getting in a few hands of blackjack or my mom using the numbers of my birthday to play roulette. Neither of my parents were gamblers. We weren't there for them. This was meant to be a lesson for me, my dad's unspoken comment on a world of unnecessary risk inhabited by bleary-eyed men who ran their hands through their hair as they stared at the empty spaces where their stacks of chips had once been. This was meant to be a warning about misplaced priorities that I was supposed to read in the utterly blank faces of women with drooling, doped babies slung over their shoulders as they fed ravenous, unforgiving slot machines for hours on end.

Halfway through the colossal slot machine floor of a gigantic structure, my dad and I stopped. TRIPLE DIAMOND, 24 carat gold, covered with rubies.

"You want to give it a try?"

I nodded. The question had.cbemade my heart jump.

"How much?"

"I don't have any money."

"Well, how about I give you a dollar."

I shrugged. "Tell you what, I'll give you a dollar.

My dad held his arm out to me with a quarter in it.

"It's just a quarter."

"Okay. Okay. Fine. I'll see if I can raise somebody on the CB."

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Halfway through the casino, I was sucked into the gravitational pull of a gigantic slot machine that seemed to be the center of it all: BIG TRIPLE DIAMOND DELUXE. I stood transfixed: it was crimson and gold, covered with flashing lights, taller and far wider than my dad.

"You want to try your luck on this thing?" he asked.

I nodded. The blank look on his face made it impossible to tell if my answer had disappointed him.

"How much money do you have on you?"

"I don't have any money," I said.

"Well, how can you gamble if you don't have any money?"

I shrugged.

"Tell you what, I'll loan you the dollar. But if you lose you owe me."

My father went to the cashier's cage and came back with a silver dollar.

"Good luck," he said.

I hefted the coin in my palm. It was the bicentennial job, the one with Eisenhower on the head and a cracked liberty bell and a meteor-riddled moon on the flipside. The moon reminded me of the night before and the bikers. I wondered what they thought about the idea of risk and luck and decided they probably believed that risk came with the territory and the only kind of luck was the kind you make for yourself. I put the coin into the slot and heard it rattle down through the machine's metal guts. The arm was as thick around as my own; my hand barely covered the fist of a black ball at its end. My dad and I stood together watching the machine's three eyes spin until they stopped short. Two silver dollars clunked down into the stainless steel mouth. I reached in.


"Here you go," I said, offering him one of the silver dollars. It felt good to win, but I also felt somewhat guilty, the same the way I would years later after the first time I beat him at racquetball.

"No, you keep them both. We'll call it even."

"Excuse me, sir." A man in a dark suit strode up to my dad out of nowhere. I'm sure you're aware that children are not allowed to gamble in this or any other casino."

"He's not gambling. You think I'd let my son gamble? We were just passing through. I was trying to teach him a lesson."

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"He's not gambling. You think I'd let my son gamble? We were just passing through. I was trying to teach him a lesson."

The man in the suit glanced down at the two silver dollars in my palm. I quickly shoved them into my pocket.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

My dad sized the man up, his eyes lingering on the walkie-talkie microphone attached to his lapel. "So you're telling me we have to go?"

"I'm afraid that is correct, sir. Now."
“Okay. I understand. Sorry about this. I didn’t think it would be a problem.”

“Oh, of course not, sir.”

My dad put his arm around my shoulder, which wasn’t something he usually did. “Let’s go find your mom. I think you’ve seen enough of this place.”

We caught up with my mom in a jewelry store in the Forum Shops. She was admiring a pair of sapphire earrings in a glass case.

“You like those?” my dad asked.

“They’re beautiful, but they’re too much.”

He leaned over the case and looked at the price. “They’re not too much. Besides, Christmas is only five months away.” He smiled at her.

She reached out and took his hand, “Oh, Francis, no, you don’t have to, really. It’s okay.”

“I know,” he said. “I want to.”

My mom hurried off to find someone to open the case. My dad gave me a nudge and a wink as she walked away. “That’s the kind of thing you can do for someone you love when you don’t waste your money gambling,” he said.

That night, I heard whispering and soft laughter coming from the bedroom in the back of the Winnebago. The next morning it was as if my parents had never even driven through Salt Lake City or fought in front of me or made their frantic escape during the night of the motorcycles. It was as if, for them, nothing bad had happened.

I don’t remember much else about that trip, but my last glimpse of those dark outlaws laughing and stumbling through the dust swirled headlights of Spanky’s dirt parking lot has never left me. That naked woman with her head thrown back in ecstasy. That guy with the eagle rising off his chest. They were all I could think about for the next week—these people living lives I instinctively knew I’d never truly understand no matter how I tried. Their America came at them in a blast of hot wind as they thundered in a pack down rolling stretches of highway. They did what they wanted, not what they were told, and they would probably rather die than live a life like the one I knew then, like the one my parents hoped I would eventually give my own children.

The one other important thing I do recall from the trip is that the day before we were supposed to turn the Winnebago in and fly back to Detroit, it was broken into on the edge of Chinatown in San Francisco, and my mom’s new earrings and my dad’s camera bag containing his various lenses and the twenty or so rolls of film he’d shot during our vacation were stolen.
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My dad gave
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ight in front
motorcycles.

My mom said as she started looking frantically around
the Winnebago, "I think they stole my earrings!"

"Forget the damn earrings, Teresa. We can get you another pair. Every single picture from this goddamn trip is gone!"

Maybe it was my memory still stained with what had happened the week before, but the anger seemed to rise in him too quickly, as if he had still not yet fully returned to himself. In that instant I understood what was different: it wasn't him but me who had changed; it wasn't him but me who would keep changing, keep dividing down the middle. I'd gotten my first glimpse of the fact that all of us who claim to be good and reasonable are actually two people, one of them very different from the person those who love us believe we are. We've all slid a different picture of ourselves beneath the one others see every day.

What I mean is that on top or tucked beneath, there are no pictures of our trip across America but this one. No pictures of me looking down into the Grand Canyon. No pictures of me standing in the middle of the Bonneville Salt Flats with my arms out-stretched. No pictures of me, the grinning innocent, pointing up the nose of Lincoln at Mt. Rushmore. All the pictures from the days before and after their fight and that night of the motorcycles, all the pictures capturing the difference of before and after on my face, in my folded arms, in the way I'm leaning like a punk against some Chinatown lamppost with my hands shoved deep into my pockets and a wise-ass grin cracked just wide enough for the future of a dangled cigarette—all those pictures are gone forever. They're out there on their own, making their way down the byways of junk and discarded things that pulse just below the surface of this nation. They're part of the dark underbelly, mixed in with those people and places most of us just want to flush away and pretend not to see. My mom and dad and every other upstanding American like them would have you believe those pictures are simply decomposing in a California landfill. But I am certain they were found by some naïve kid who's put them in a photo album he can't set down because he's convinced that if he stares long enough he'll eventually see through the surface of where he's been to where he is and where he's supposed to go from there.

"God damn it!" He'd said when we came back loaded down with cheap Chinatown trinkets to find the side door of the Winnebago sprung open and my mom's earrings and his bag gone—nothing but the earrings and his bag at that. "I don't care about the lenses. Why did those assholes have to take the film? They didn't need to take the film."

"My earrings!" my mom said as she started looking frantically around the Winnebago, "I think they stole my earrings!"

"Forget the damn earrings, Teresa. We can get you another pair. Every single picture from this goddamn trip is gone!"

Mom and dad gave me a look of thing you wanted, not many wanted, not how I tried. I wondered in a dark underbelly, mixed in with those people and places most of us just want to flush away and pretend not to see. My mom and dad and every other upstanding American like them would have you believe those pictures are simply decomposing in a California landfill. But I am certain they were found by some naïve kid who's put them in a photo album he can't set down because he's convinced that if he stares long enough he'll eventually see through the surface of where he's been to where he is and where he's supposed to go from there.