

Chicago Plates

They'd eloped as kids really, off to Reno under the spell of the why not? I don't know how many good things begin in Reno, but somewhere there are statistics that would confirm, so many things end in Reno. Say you became a millionaire in Reno, while standing there, holding up one of those giant cardboard checks for the camera, you'd be thinking of the first place you'd want to fly, as a millionaire. Reno is good enough to win the money, but not enough to want to stay and spend it.

My parents deliberated on a new beginning, Portland or Seattle maybe. The Northwest was a logical move from Northern Cali, with a relatively short distance from the family.

One trip to New Mexico instead, the expansive opening of land to horizon sold them.

My mother was prodded by a friend to give Santa Fe a try. At that point in time, all of my parents' friends were fellow Witnesses. Los Testiculos de Jehovah. No translation, it's perfect the way it is.

My mother's friend was a chubby guy with a family. He'd been re-commissioned as a straight man, to adhere to the Testament. His ugly wife and two girls would fill out the resume of a model citizen.

Santa Fe had carved out a little reputation for itself down in the Southwest. It was beaded Navajo jewelry, stale Apache frybread, old trucks and turquoise. Santa Fe was Mexicans too, but not New Mexicans like the state touted, just old Mexicans who put a new twist on an old language. And there we were, intrigued by our new days in the state capital, just north of where Billy the Kid's horse laid down hooves. Among the dirt roads and the lightning battles. In my few first five in Cali, my dresser drawer holding contents well, a horse with golden blond hair, posed in a trot. Even in a cheap toy, I understood the regal in the animal, that a friendship could be nurtured. Plastic stallion had a calming effect on me.

The '80s were the peak for Santa Fe. Exiled Cali hippies opened up art galleries everywhere. The galleries brought along the snobbery to an otherwise dusty little town. With snobbery came Hollywood.

Pops was working at the only swanky hotel in the downtown area, parking their rentals. Michael Douglas seemed to live there after his shoots wrapped. The 80's were good for Michael Douglas and pops said he was nice, so I took to the Jewel of the Nile. But that's the movies and we didn't celebrate Christmas. That was for the other kids and also a first major lesson in being an outsider on a grand scale.

The 80's however, were not good for marriages. As Reagan packed the RV out of D.C., the humans of the country were pulling up their stakes on holy matrimony. I was watching the effects of it on my classmates. Their sudden lack of interest in school, the longer faces, the absenteeism.

My parents were all good though, until they weren't no good anymore. They sat us down on their bed and told us they were going to separate.

My sister and I looked at each other and then the tears came. They re-assured us everything would be fine, that they still loved us, that both of them would be in our lives. After that, nothing really changed. Nobody moved out.

Our house was big enough, my dad just moved into my sister's room. My sister would take his spot in my mom's bed. We dodged a bullet. This could work. They were a little colder to each other but things started to smooth themselves out as the school year went on.

My Gigantes had made it to the World Series that year and they were taking on cross-city rivals. I was hooked. I could connect with the familia at home by cheering out in the desert.

Then the feed went to snow. I sighed and started sparring with the side of the TV. It came back on and so much had changed. The players weren't at their positions anymore. Some of them had their families walking towards them at second base. All-stars stared at the sky. There were hugs and eyes that were suspicious of everything. I'd missed the single biggest event back home and I was pissed I didn't get to join in on the chaos.

1989 was coming to a close. This was my first warning that the new decade was going beyond even my imagination. Volcanic streams leaning on tecton, done shaken the Legos out of my hometown.

By the following year, my parents ushered in the 90's by sitting us down on the same bed and telling us that they'd tried everything to stay together.

We were all dressed up, we'd just come from the hall (it was never regarded as church, even though it was exactly that, a non-decorated minimalist church. The Catholics had stained-glass windows, the Jews had 8 candles and the Muslims had compact mobile prayer rugs. As for us, we had bland. It's always been a horse race between Mormons & Witnesses, who could accomplish more bland. Depending on the year, the title belt changed hands.) I had penny loafers on and a tie.

Ten year olds should never feel that heavy. We all knew this was the aftershock that would tumble the foundation. You simply couldn't walk this one off. Even in such youth, we respected their effort at an attempt.

My parents had built the house we were living in, it was a gem in the rough. It never saw completion by my parents' hands. We lived amongst exposed walls, bed sheets hung as doors, plumbing snakes, padded fiberglass insulation bubbles. The following weeks were a slow divide of property.

Our one and half acres did get plenty of snow, the neighbors got their share as well. Snow was a giving treat unto itself. We learned of its bite on limbs, station wagons ice skating upper crusts and the negotiations warranted in a maneuver slush. It slowed time for my sister and me, late starts and outright cancellations meant more Woody Woodpecker and less long division. Looking out windows early mornings waiting for your school to make the roll call, hoping the world and the sun stayed home and left these ice hills to coat in damp cow licks, hanging jackets on hooks of frozen carrot limb.

In winter, the cold sometimes pushed me out of bed and into the hallway to sleep near the kerosene heater. Occasionally stumbling out to find my sister had beat me to the prime spot. It glowed orange and spewed gold that would red your face if you slept too close. Looking into my sisters' room I noticed pops wasn't in the temporary bed. My sister however, was in her bed.

Further investigation was required. Dropping my comforter to the floor, putting the weight of my body on the balls of my feet. I rested myself on the gypsum board wall of the master bedroom and put my eye to space measured poor. A crevasse letting flies feel like ghosts.

TV hummed visuals, no sound. Pops was romancing the stone. He had no shirt on, just pants. He even had his belt on, I hated that thing. I thought it was funny that it was roughly two in the morning and he still had his belt on.

Mama was naked. They weren't going to stop and listen for the creaks of my presence. I smiled and listen to my heart applaud them in 4/8 timing off the wall. I was glad they had broken the rules of separation or divorce. They were still under the same roof and there was still love there, they were young and I was younger.

I only took in enough to guide me in my future. Hands can go everywhere. Kissing deep without air, kissing would never be overrated. Mama was submitting herself to my father's muscles.

I didn't need the heater anymore, back to bed for me. The separation would be called off, I was sure of it.

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Back at school, I had the syndrome.

The long face, the confusion, grades submarined.

I stopped kicking it with the white boy's, all their parents were still together. Life had a more sinister tone to it, it was deep in my kidney's.

When all of your aim is gone, the tribe of the lost finds you.

Drew: Did you do your homework Lucas?

Lucas: Nope. What'cha think I'm doing now? Drawing stickmen?

Drew: I started but didn't finish.

Lucas: Look at Mrs. Zimmerman, she's got the biggest boobs. She always wears bright colored shirts that show them off.

Drew: Why you think I didn't finish my homework? I couldn't stop daydreaming about those pillows.

Lucas: I wonder if all Jewish women have 'em that big?

Drew: How you know she's Jewish?

Lucas: You see---but don't hear. She mentions it often.

Drew: She talks to you about her boobs?

Lucas: No stupid! About being Jewish.

Johnny: Pssstt. Hey Drew, you know all your capitals?

Drew: Enough. Trying to get down the Eastern side. You?

Johnny: A la verga! Hell no. Tell me Kentucky.

Drew: Too easy bro. Just remember Louisville slugger.

Lucas: You betta get a haircut Johnny, that pompadour is slowing the growth of yer brains.

(we all laugh)

Drew: You should get your cousin to help you, I bet he knows them all by now.

Lucas: Let's test him.

Johnny: Gimme one I'll try him out.

Drew: HMMMMMMMMMMMM...

Lucas: HMMMMMMMM...how bout Arkansas?

Johnny: Good one. Wait, what is it?

Drew: You were gonna ask him and you didn't even know? Take a guess.

Johnny: UMMMMMM...Missouri?

(Drew and me laugh)

Lucas: Capitals Johnny, capitals. That's another state.

Drew: Forget it, its Little Rock isn't it?

Lucas: Yeah, it's Little Rock.

Drew: Awwwwwww mannnnnn!

Lucas: A la verga!

Johnny: Gimme another one.

Lucas: It's all yours Drew.

Drew: Montana

Johnny: That one just messes with yer head, all I see is Joe Montana throwing passes.

Mrs. Zimmerman: C'mon guys, I don't want you to get up here and not get past the Mississippi River.

Johnny: Hey did you guys see that?

Lucas: Orale, she scratched one of them.

Miguel: What did she scratch?

Drew: She had an itch on Mount Rushmore.
(all laugh)

Lucas: What state is Mount Rushmore in Johnny?

Johnny: In her bra.

Lucas: Correct-a-mundo

We find ourselves in 2nd period, we've changed classrooms.

Miguel: Where's Raul at?

Drew: He said he's coming late today.

Raul enters just as Drew finishes.

Drew: We was just talking about you.

Raul: I was hoping the appointment would go longer and I would get here right when recess began. Did you bring them?

Drew: Yup.

Lucas: Bring what?

Raul: You'll have to wait and see.

Lucas: I like surprises.

Johnny: Raul, I heard you screaming like a girl all the way from the dentist's chair.

A laugh for all. The bell has done its dance and we find ourselves outside.

We find ourselves following Drew as usual, because he's the one holding the secret. I wonder how many secrets I'll need to become a leader. Our crew makes a beeline across the soccer field of sand. I feel powerful among our small crew. I feel that the basketballs being dribbled are on pause, the eyes of our peers are stapled to our backs.

The playground stretches out to the arroyo, full of trees and plants and density that us kids usually don't venture into. We pick a solid tree for cover and gather around in circle. We've definitely sparked the attention of our classmates, but luckily none of them ventured down into the arroyo with us.

Drew is the only one who brought his backpack with him to the playground.

You can tell he's a scholar by the absence of any book weight in the pack. It looks foolish that he even has it on because it looks entirely empty. He digs into it and pulls out a small brown bag.

I know its not his lunch, Drew never brings lunch. He lives about a block away from school and the faculty let him go home for lunch. Sometimes we tag along with him to lounge in his empty pad.

Everybody is smiling. They all have their reasons. Mine is the element of surprise, I genuinely like surprises and being able to share it with my new crew.

Since it seems everyone else knows of the contents, Drew hands me the bag first. On the bottom, past all the wrinkles, are a handful of loose cigarettes. They look weird outside of their box. I pull one out, stare at it. The filter, the length, the one strand of tobacco peeking its head out the end.

Johnny gets to it real quick. He's got the lighter out and putting that thing to work. Johnny probably had his first cigarette before his first word was spoken. In fact, I bet he skipped the word and went straight to his first sentence after that first drag.

Johnny: "Damn that tastes real smooth".

Johnny always seemed too advanced on the wrong kinds of things. His collection of different colored wifebeaters was a formidable collection. On this day he wore a black Raiders t-shirt that he turned into a wifebeater by cutting off the sleeves.

Johnny I knew the least about which, made him the most interesting to me. On the bus ride home, Johnny's house was always first. It looked like thieves had come in the night and stole all the good out of the house leaving the skeleton on cinder blocks. I'd always expected to see the completion of his house but it never came to be. In the front yard of his house was always the biggest pack of malnourished dogs you'd ever seen. At least one of the bitches was always pregnant and swinging swollen teats.

Towards the end of that year, Johnny's mother, who nobody had ever seen, was killed in a drunk driving accident. Drunk driving accidents on dusty, bumpy roads in the whole state of New Mexico were a common occurrence. It's a weird occurrence when you wonder where someone else's mother fits into the picture and then one day she shows up for her final bow. When I saw her picture in the newspaper, it finally made sense why Johnny was so much darker than his cousin Miguel. Johnny's mother was full Apache.

*(In 2006, 50-year old Robert Charles Comer, a convicted murderer about to be lethally injected, was asked if he had any last words? "Yes. Go Raiders!")

After they all get the jump on me, I add my own smoke signal to the pot.

I'm smart enough to take a small drag to test it out. After I wade in the water a bit, not a single one of them knows my feelings on cigarette. My DNA stamped with resounding words of NO! will never be for me. California left a horrific brand on the insides of my lungs. Bronchitis & wheezing had already made my decision on how I felt about smoke.

But on that morning, I'm bout it.

I'm impressed by Drew and Johnny who, can get it to come out of their noses in a slow stream. Our smoke signals are being answered with curiosity. A burly white kid made it down within viewing distance. He's one witness too many. Other kids stand at the crest of where the arroyo and the end of the playground meet. That's as far as most will go.

We hear rustling in the near distance and we all freeze up. Out of the bushes jumps a local dog that occasionally roams the playground. He's probably happy to see us in his territory, instead of the usual jackrabbits.

He saunters up to me and I give him a stern pet on his side. I'm glad he's arrived, I can use him as a decoy to let that cigarette burn in my left hand while I pet him with my right.

We hear the bell ring.

We put out our butts and make sure we throw them in different directions so the evidence doesn't congregate in one crime scene.

Miguel, being the efficient little guy that he is, passes out gum to us all so we can finish off our concealment.

A double dose of adrenaline, a potential snitch & nicotine on the carve. Though my pulls soft, I was riding a slight jolt.

The way my classmates are looking at me is what fuels the wave. They didn't think I had it in me.

Lunch rolls around and with it another bell.

This lunch won't be the same. I escape the gossip of my peers by getaway car. The car is driven by my mother, who's taken an extended lunch from her job at the hospital.

She had this lunch date set up for a few weeks now. It was probably suggested that she do this on opinion of her counselor.

Mom didn't hesitate to find help after the marriage incinerated. She found a Yoga woman with a big afro who did counseling on the side. Mama didn't do Yoga, she just took her up on the low rates she was offering. It wasn't just her counselor anymore either, my sister and me had begun sessions as well.

Yoga lady encouraged us to release all the pain. It seemed like my sister knocked it out in two sessions. Me on the other hand, I'd dealt with an elixir fix for many years. I'd have out of body experiences when tears put foot on welcome mat. Glimpses at myself, shaking my head "what a pussy".

Sometimes through the haze of heavy eyelashes I'd catch my sister looking at me with scorn, I could tell she pitied me. I was her older brother and I was an emotional wild card. Up to that point, she had followed me everywhere and mimicked almost everything I did. I think this set in motion her first guiding thought about her independence.

I can't remember the last time I'd been in a car with only my mother. Small moments like this were things I was still getting used to. Parents on the outs is so large, walls built with immediacy for your brain not to hurdle. Not much was said when I first got in, I didn't even know where we were going. I ponder asking her about the police officer in the coma, but decide against it.

I could hear my mother taking notes in her head as she stopped at each intersection. Details to report back to the counselor. He's very distant, never smiles anymore. Answers, single words.
Lucas: Where we going?

Mama: To get some food. I got a recommendation on a good place. You hungry?

Lucas: It's lunchtime so I guess.

I wonder if she can smell the Marlboros on me? My paranoid thoughts have made me oblivious to how far we've traveled from campus.

Lucas: We going to 'Burque* to eat or what?

(*Slang for Albuquerque)

Mama: Haha. You'll see Lucas. (She laughs)
Can you look in my purse for my sunglasses? I can hardly see past all the glare.

Reaching to the back seat, I'm sifting through the contents that hide the lenses. The distinguishing package of gum that is foil and bright lettering. Gum popped out in square concrete shells.

I pop one out without asking, just to make sure my breath doesn't leak the truth. I look out the window to hide the fact that I'm popping one of her gum pills. In the first crush of the hard shell my mouth is overpowered with menthol. We're downtown and looking for a parking space.

I still don't know where we're going but I know it will be a significant upgrade over the school tray. Mama trying her best to parallel park.

Mama: Shit! I have to do it again. Sorry.

The best thing about my parents dissolve, is we're no longer allowed to be Witnesses.

No mas, going door to door, wearing suits, paradise this and paradise that. I get to focus on being a kid and nothing more, life without limits decreed by Ecclesiastes.

The absence of church has brought on the first noticeable change, mama handing out four letter words like bus transfers. I smile. Hell yeah, SHIT!

Walking up the stairs, I read the signs.

CHICAGO STYLE HOT DOGS. REAL VIENNA SAUSAGE. 100% BEEF.

Pops got me into Chicago style pizza, was intrigued by a pie that stood the height my knuckles. It seemed Chicago might be a city as proud about their unique cuisine as New Mexico was.

Inside is a busy business. Patrons are standing about in line, at a countertop, putting condiments on large hot dogs. The menu, daunting.

Mama: You know what you want?

Lucas: Not really. Lots looks good. You know what you're getting?

Mama: My co-worker say's to try the Comiskey.

While she orders I get us a seat outside on the deck patio. They have large umbrellas to make sure only the sausage gets well done.

When she brings them over, we sit there and stare at them for a minute. You can hardly see a sausage underneath all of the vegetables that are minced perfectly on top. Tomatoes, onions, sport peppers and roasted garlic.

I don't taste meat the first few bites. It's hard to hold up to your mouth. I stare at the mess in my hand, then I watch how my mom does it.

She's a small woman, her hands better suited to a child. So small I had to be cut out of her womb. So small that as I began to near in on her height, she began using a wooden cooking spoon to enforce the seriousness of various rules I tried to push. So small, that she always had enough of a Napoleon complex to toss at any man or woman who challenged her inappropriately. So small, that she fit perfectly into the crawlspace underneath our home, a rest stop for Gila monsters and centipedes to relax in total darkness, to fetch our stubborn cat. So small, that the EKG machine she pushed around at the hospital stood to her chin. She read back to doctors the grammatical errors and badly written chapters of what were once, healthy hearts. I never asked her of the last moments she might have spent in a room with an ailing patient, staring at a chart that looked like a dark day for Wall Street stock.

She'll have a few stabs at it before she concedes to the fork and knife. She gave me a break from my bad influences and put some flavor back on my plate.

Lucas: Mama?

Mama: Yeah?

Lucas: The policeman, the one in the coma? Has he woken up yet?

Mama: Nope. He probably won't either. The doctors say the longer you're in one, the harder it is to come out. He's been under for...hmmmm (counts out her fingers) wow! 5 years now.

Lucas: Does his family still visit him?

Mama: Well yes, sometimes you see the pictures from home, but not as much anymore. I hardly see him anymore either. The machines keep him stable, there isn't much left to do really.

We keep this game going for years, my curiosity never dying for a man I'd never seen, who refused to rejoin us in the last decade of the 20th century.

Some weeks later, we'd all be suspended for our puff in the arroyo.

It would be my last trial with cigarettes. Even though mama and pops were no more, their disappointment in me remained unified.