

His Country

My father's stout, familiar voice sounded fine, but feebleness edged between his words. We spoke of our agreement. A pact created long before he dialed the phone from two thousand miles away. I'd expected the conversation and it brought sadness ahead of our words. I choked back tears and sniffles. A calendar on my wall marked the date as another milestone, October fifteenth, 2007.

His request to uphold a surreal promise became another marker along the highway running through my life. A series of ess-curves, peaks, and valleys. My path tried to follow his curved road yet found a course towards a different horizon. Dad's journey neared completion while mine continued the stages of midlife construction. The way things should be, I suppose. Our powerful oath made in good faith added to my contempt for certain things being resolute.

I'd expected the long-distance phone call from my homeland and predicted what we'd say. The moment was inescapable and the trap had snapped shut. Most events that are inevitable come with harsh pain and forced ease. Taxes and sudden change from tragic moments to name a few.

"David," echoed from the phone, "it's time to put my plan into motion. How soon can you be here?" I had an odd sensation he'd said the words in 1970, the year of my birth. Somehow those sentences had taken over three decades to reach me at that exact moment. They were right on time.

"A day, maybe less."

"You'll come alone?"

"Yeah, I'll leave 'em here until..." I glanced down the hallway at three bedroom doors

closed for the night.

“‘til they have to come.” The weakness overtook his strong vocals like ice in the fissures of rocks breaking them apart.

“Yeah.”

“If I could find a way...”

“You’d do it on your own.”

“My old body—I need your help.”

“I know, I’ll be there soon.” Until then he’d admitted being unable to do something on two or three occasions.

“All right, see you then.”

“Yeah, I’m guessing late tomorrow.”

Twelve hours after we talked I hopped on a flight and flew toward my dad’s storm. Airbound to my birthplace, memories and thoughts ate into my peace. A frenzied three-hour drive from the Denver Airport had long, placating moments. The magnificent scenery detached my mind from what lay ahead in sporadic randomness. There was plenty of time between those moments for my turmoil to become messier. As the distance closed I become more uncertain.

The browned, grassy flats of South Park fell into the mirrors. Aspen yellows and evergreen firs blurred past. Delight to be in the more rugged country soared like the mountains surrounding me. Taller peaks beckoned in the distance but they were nowhere near my destination. Not this trip anyhow.

A dreamy town called Bailey became my mid-trip stop for donuts and coffee. The unbelievable Rocky Mountain air, before winter sets in, tasted savory. I drew deep breaths in

through my nose to deepen the flavor. The action increased my craving for the home cooked meal I'd feast on in a few hours.

His plan weighed upon my love of being back in our native land. The burden thickening like the urban sprawl in Jefferson County. Its palpable taint and distortion of nature continued with impunity. Every passing second I'd been away, progress overtook greater amounts of the landscape. More trees and plants along with majestic views were now cityscape. When would his plan envelope all of me and blacken my heart further?

My dislike of the new buildings and strip mall areas I'd driven through surged. I welcomed the angry distraction because my ragged and raw emotions needed focus. Suburbia would absorb the small town of Bailey in a decade. Full immersion in Dad's looming decay consumed me before night fell.

I slid back into the small, awful-smelling rental car and pushed its limits on the aggressive inclines. As the engine whined I sipped hot coffee and ate large bites of cake donuts. Rapid progress towards my parent's home became imperative and cleanliness of the car a whimsical idea. I'd pledged the promise to him a few years ago while we sat around the fire at elk camp.

"I don't want a fucking funeral." His words came out of nowhere; we'd been discussing the Rockies and their chances of winning the World Series.

"Who in the hell said anything about a funeral?" I tipped the ratty, foldout camp chair a little further back and held in an uneasy scoff.

"No coffin, no graveyard—none of that shit, you hear me?"

"Dad, what're you talking about?"

“That’s not how I wanna be laid to rest.” He used a gnarled, crooked finger to point in my direction across the blazing fire.

“Where’s this coming from?”

“Your mother thinks we’ll be placed next to each other in the town’s graveyard.”

“And you want something else?”

“I sure as hell don’t want a damn preacher talking over my corpse in a pine box under the falsetto sky of a church. My useless bones don’t need to be taking up valuable land.”

“I see,” three dead soldiers clanked against one another when I kicked the clump of mountain grass near me, “well, what do you want?”

“To be cremated and ya’ll spread my ashes wherever’s most fitting.” “Where? Fossil Ridge?” My head shook from disbelief.

“I doubt any of you could find your way in or out of there without me.”

A long, frigid day in the fields with no sign of game had made me sour, “True, but this decision is between you and Mom.”

“Why does she have any say in my demise?”

“I dunno, but I’m sure that’s how those things work.” I wished another beer would materialize in my hand.

“You’re right, but does that mean it’s right?” He got up and put two more logs into the crackling flames, which surprised me. We’d agreed to let the fire go out.

“Can we talk about something else?”

His lip curled, “No. Conversations like this get put off until it’s too fucking late.” He glared at me in accusation.

“Fine. What I’m supposed to do about any of this?”

“Help me hike into Fossil Ridge when the time comes.” He headed off into the darkness.

The ice chest, next to an old army officer’s tent used for base camp, squeaked open. The lid closed with a thwunk.

“What do you mean, when the times comes? Nobody knows...”

“Oh, I ain’t so sure about that shit. ‘Sides, if I go on my own terms a year or two earlier than slated, well, that’d be damn fine by me.” He thrust another bottle of ice-chilled beer into my hand and eased himself into his chair.

“Dad, I can’t do what you’re asking.”

“I’m asking you to help me get back in to my old hunting area when it’s my time to go.” He moved his hands as if spreading or flattening the air beneath them, “I’ll take care of the rest.”

“This is too much.”

“Yes or no? I’d ask your brother, but he’s too out of shape.”

“You’re fucking serious.” I pried the cap off the sweat-glistened bottle using the end of his hand-me-down hunting knife.

“I won’t ask again. Yes or no?”

“You know I’ll do whatever you want.” I took a quick drink and slipped the bottle into the chair’s cup holder. Then I held out my open hands in a show of good faith.

“Yes, but will you do this for me?”

“Yeah, sure, I guess.”

“No hemming and hawing. I want a decisive answer.” He gave me a stern look, harder than he’d done in years. We could’ve been playing poker for high stakes.

“Fine. The answer is yes.” Christ, I’d just talked my way out of getting the belt or some shit.

“Thank you.”

His wish and expectation went beyond what I owed him. The gift would be grander than any present I'd given him but short of his unconventional endowment. He loved his adopted son as if I was his own flesh and blood. How obligated did that make me?

Could I have done the same thing if my children were born by a method other than nature's way? Would I have been half as good as Dad was to an adoptee? I've no idea. I've doubted my ability to love a child whose lineage comes from someone other than me.

The cabin-style log house, nestled in the Sangre de Cristo mountain range, abounded with familiarity. I'd lost intimacy with my former home many years ago. The same old pictures hung upon the walls, but newer ones dangled among them with similar care. Faces and people I'd yet to meet glared back with matched uncertainty. A stranger gawking at fellow strangers through the glass.

Mom's eyes glinted with delight to see me, but they also held a hint of questioning. I hugged her tight which intensified the quizzical gaze. The old boy's explanation was good but imperfect. We spoke of our fictitious late season fishing trip to Elevenmile Canyon Reservoir. We acted as if the outing was real. She nodded and smiled while we talked of the fish we'd catch or weather that might deter our fun. If she knew something was amiss, she did a fantastic job of keeping any concern to herself.

Her chicken and dumplings with blue ribbon apple pie were superb but different. The tastes were an imbalanced harmony against my youthful memories much like the house. After my stomach became full enough to ease the queasiness I stared at his face. His features had withered more than I'd expected, more than I wanted.

His charming spirit, which always appeared to be beyond our time and place, had diminished. How was that possible? The mighty cosmos and time caught up to my father's immutability. The great devourers had not spared him as I dreamed they would. Another impossibility in my youthful brain had shattered.

His once ageless face and acquired old-man posture indicated dissuading him was pointless. The well-known stubbornness remained unchallenged. Our lies to my mother almost became the deal breakers but I went along with them. For reasons that eluded me.

The urge to let her in on our secret roiled inside of me. We ate the bountiful dinner at their centuries-old dining table. The wooden distance between us helped cool off the inner chaos when it boiled up. Disappointment had something to do with keeping quiet. The mass of that iceberg lurked below the water's surface. Respect for his wish and upholding the lies had a break point, but not then.

The nicks and dings in the walnut surface of the table top became my distraction. I focused on them whenever their questioning looks became too much. Stories behind some of the imperfections mystified me like the alien pictures on their walls. Smiles from what caused many of the known marks remained suppressed. Unlike my sullen disposition. I hid my sadness but I could've done a better job.

We started to finish the preparations for our trip and its aftermath. It was clear he'd done as much as possible but a lot remained. For two days I busted my ass getting things completed. The to-do list he had passed in secrecy after the homecoming supper neared completion. He tried to help me with the remaining tasks and errands, but he'd get out of breath. His quick fatigue unsettled me more and ignoring it was impossible.

He sat and watch me work. His all-knowing eyes fixated on me most of the day while I toiled. He struggled but held in the corrective words that I wanted him to speak. My desperation for him to tell me what to do was something I'd yet to experience. His methods were no more right or wrong than how I did things. They were his ways and that's all there was to it.

My mother remained oblivious to our activities because she wanted no part of it. A normal pattern with her and my father. This time I left blame out of the equation. Who was I to fault her? I'd have given anything to ignore what we were up to and turn my back upon the whole ordeal. I wished my brother had kept himself in better shape. Would Dad have asked his first born for this favor if it'd been an option?

His gruff, muted call came through the bedroom door and wracked my nerves. The old customary wake-up threw me further off balance. I wrenched myself out of the sweat-drenched covers twenty minutes after his visit. If I had stayed there any longer he'd have been back to roust me again. My desire for a second roll out was low.

Our morning start, with sunrise a few hours away, was typical for him. A gloomy, latefall sky held itself above us like winter had moved in overnight. We'd be gone well before Mom would be up and I thanked her ability to sleep in late. She would've made me fall apart. The same way a first season elk blind disintegrates by the following spring.

The standard bowl of hot oatmeal and frozen blueberries went down hard, like I'd eaten wet cement. Most of the berries hadn't defrosted in the grey goop, as if the mood needed to be set in deeper. Last minute preparations whittled away at the morning, but we drove off as first light began its soft glow.

An hour into the drive we turned off of the main roads and away from civilization. We headed to the infamous Fossil Ridge wilderness area. The self-explanatory name was a magical,

mystical place in my youth. His fantastic hunting stories involving the area had created it as such. It'll remain a land of untold wonders until I'm dead and maybe even after that. Once again the ridge became our destination and goal.

He called Fossil Ridge the breadbasket because for decades he killed an elk each year in its remote locale. He did this to help augment our food supplies but sport was the main reason.

An incredible feat but unnecessary. There're easier places to hunt elk in cool, colorful Colorado. The strenuous half-day walk to get into his area humbled the fittest of us all. Many people think of it as God's country, but my father owns the deed to that hallowed place.

His new, four-wheel drive truck gave an occasional protest as we drove over craggy rocks and wash outs. An old mining road tested the vehicle but it crawled along with ease. The maroon Ford F-150 was the one new "car" purchase he'd ever made in his entire life. Back then the strange impulse buy made little sense to anyone in our family. At that moment, the reason for his shopping spree became clear. His older, junked truck would have fallen apart on that damned road.

The horrible journey along the indistinct road took an eternity to complete. Every other time we'd made the trip, I grumbled about the bumpy ride and rough conditions. This time I tried to savor everything the drive put us through, but failed due to added misery. I doubted if anyone knew where the road ended, including him. When I stopped his fancy new pickup truck, the distinguishing features of the road had vanished miles behind us. He gave no sign if I parked in the right place, just a quick nod to say, "good driving, kid".

I'd put some nonessential items in my father's backpack and little else. The hike was going to be extra murderous because I'd have to help him most of the way. A cumbersome heavy

pack on his old back would make the trek worse. He hefted both packs while we geared up to leave the truck and I flushed with shame.

Before I could explain why his pack held next to nothing he winked at me. His most familiar gesture of jest made me grin. He set the heavier pack on the ground at my feet and slung the lighter one onto his shoulders. His old frame turned away, and he trudged up the trail

whistling Sweet Caroline. The redness of shame burned into place, and his wink became another picture-perfect snapshot in my cerebral photo album.

In a matter of minutes I caught up to him. We clambered up an indistinguishable part of the game trail like a pack of wolves were gnashing at our heels. An eerie feeling overcame me because of my novice skills in mountaineering and orienteering. Could I find my way out of there?

He struggled as we made our way to the area I had hunted one time but had been to six or seven times. He fended me off with angry recoils each time I tried to help him, so I gave up. Dad led and I followed, as we'd done for so many years. The ten-year-old boy trailed his formidable father once more.

The long day of hiking warbled along like an old out-of-tune player piano lilting out Rodgers and Hammerstein pieces. We moved along with as methodic, deliberate and determined a pace as possible. Our movement was half as fast as those mistuned melodies but I enjoyed the offbeat speed in the oddest of ways.

By late afternoon we arrived at the campsite exhausted and almost too spent to set up camp. Fossil Ridge lay before us like a green, yellowy-blue cornucopia of rugged, mountainous splendor. We'd made the arduous trek in an hour ahead of my bleak guesstimate when we started out from his truck. We arrived earlier than anticipated because of his unwavering will power, I shouldn't have doubted him for a moment.

In under an hour we had camp set up. The edgy night of the mountains moved in on us, and the wintry chill became more noticeable as the sunlight faded away. Soon, the campfire glowed with red-orange coals. With nothing left to do we sat as close to the heat as possible.

We sipped on the beers I had brought along and stared at the coals in silence as if we were in the same trance. We had been at that point hundreds of times before and always talked about anything and everything. On that night, the words remained unspoken and locked up inside of us. Perhaps we had nothing left to say or maybe too much.

Two loud, crackling pops of the fire brought forth a handful of flying cinders that landed a few feet outside the rock circle we had built in a matter of minutes. The embers were too far away to catch something on fire, and we remained sitting, staring, silent. Those rebellious embers turned from red glowing chunks to dark black invisible masses that blended into the murky night. This fade-to-black performance seemed to take hours, but in reality less than a few minutes had passed and then he spoke.

“You’ve been the best son a father could ever hope to have. I’m so proud of my son the military man and his accomplishments. Take care of your beautiful family.” Weakened by our exertions the conviction in his speech made my eyes dart over to him. The tingle of his heartfelt adulation coursed over every inch of my body. The sensation was like I’d just hit my first home run in little league baseball, again.

“I’m not sure what to say other than I love you too.” The words sprang out in my strong, normal voice. The recurring had sadness pushed them forth yet I remained under control by .

“Repaying you for what you’ve done will be impossible.”

“I can say the same for all the things you’ve ever done for me.”

“Guess we’re even then.” His eyes broke the long stare between us, and he turned to gaze into the blackness.

“So it seems.” I stared at the side of his face for over a minute before I turned my gaze somewhere else, anywhere else.

“I’ll be waiting for you right here or a place just like it.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Take your time my son. Take your time.” His voice lowered as if he were talking from out in the inked darkness. This chilled away the fading warmth his adulating words and looks had given me.

“I will dad, I will.”

As if he knew a cold chill, independent of the frosty night air, had gripped me, his warm, ice-blue eyes came back. He gleamed at me with glowing adoration. I’d always tried to match his illustrious look while gazing upon my own sons and daughters. I hoped my brown, non-inherited eyes came close and his ancestry knew where that remarkable gaze of a proud father came from. This time I broke our connection for the last time of the evening. I stared at the dying fire wishing we’d just lit it and were thirty years younger.

Soon I stole glances at his profile, hoping he might turn and say the outing was another glorious camping trip or a big hoax. In time I stared at him and it went unnoticed because he was peering through the dark world to something else. I had a hunch he was reliving his bygone years. At that moment it became clear my desperate hope of returning to his house together had been for naught.

My father had come home to his fossil ridge.

“Do you think it’s going to snow?” I nodded my head to the sky, made blacker from the smattering of clouds fractured apart yet coming back together. I’d packed for cold weather but not snow.

“Flurries, but I’ll be shocked to see anything more than a dusting in the morning.” He raised his head to become more comfortable in the sleeping bag and his eyes remained closed.

The menacing sky was an unnecessary tool for him to make his assured prediction.

“It’s cold—even freezing.”

“Yes, it’s cold enough, that’s for certain. Good night son.”

“Good night dad.”

Cold enough for what? I stirred the grey-black ashes of our fire one more time. A few embers came back to life but died out before I moved away. I retired for the night and huddled deep in my sleeping bag. The stars were steady pinpricks of light as they came in and out of view from behind the clouds. I wanted to absorb their light, hoping it would help warm the frigid darkness inside the pit of my stomach.

He’d directed me to head home and come back for visits whenever I wanted to say hello or needed a shoulder to cry on. I stayed at camp for a second night and it was the start of breaking promises to him. I had my reasons. The day went by in such a slow panorama of nature waking up, eking out life, and going back to sleep, I almost went crazy.

The night took even longer for time to pass. He would’ve seen my fire and came back to check on me. I sat there in the darkness trying to keep from freezing to death. Another frosty night and lack of heat source forced me into my sleeping bag before the stars were lit up in full glory. I gazed up at the sparkling lights and darkening sky with a colder, blacker feeling in my guts. My eyes tried to fix upon anything other than Orion.

My inability to do so was different but too similar to my incompetence in finding less than a handful of major constellations from the night before. I stared at the great hunter for a second night wishing he’d leave me the fuck alone, much like the obnoxious crow. It was another cold sleepless night, except this time my father’s snoring did not deter me from going

sleep. If my sleeping bag was rated for anything warmer than negative twenty degrees I'd have perished.

In the morning I made a fire to kill time because it was dragging by as if saving it in a bottle could happen. When the sun reached its apex I headed out of camp to find him. The cold, angry ground was still in my achy muscles and chilled bones as I walked due west.

He had kept this part of our conspiracy to himself, but I had a good idea of where to search for him. In a little under two hours I found my father's body after I'd become turned around more than once. During one of those wayward times I became panicky. Locating him almost become the least of my worries and priorities.

He'd traveled to the exact spot where he shot his first elk; back when he was a young man. He had shown me this place a few times throughout my life as inspiration for my hunting prowess. I bet myself he'd hiked up there in the pitch-black hours before first light in forty-five minutes or less. Even if I could've walked straight to his spot, the feat would've taken me well over an hour in the darkened conditions.

When I found him, he was cold, dead, and stiff. His majestic, ageless air was back in place on his face. That grand aura could never be taken away from him again. I sat down beside my father's body. I leaned back against the same gnarled old pine tree he'd selected to be most fitting for his last day of life.

He had used the tree for the back of his throne as he watched over his magical mountain kingdom. I sighed and finished the thought, for one last beautiful day, full of life, before the view became an eternity of vapid animation in death.

I'd learned that the elders in some Native American tribes often did what Dad had done.

They'd go to the spiritual world by getting up one fine morning before everyone else and leave.

These old souls would sneak off with quiet rectitude to unburden the tribe of their dead weight.

They'd find a magnificent or meaningful spot and sit down to wait for the spiritual world to take them back into its warm, loving embrace.

I remained by his side contemplating this and determined I'd first heard it from him. I was a teenage boy when he spoke of this ancient practice. I'd forgotten about the concept throughout my life until that day. My father was a Native American at heart in a few varied ways, but he lacked any ties to those cultures. The way he had entered his spiritual world and eternal plane fitted the man he'd been without question.

For a long time we sat next to one another as if we were on a riverbank fishing or sipping coffee on his deck while a lazy Sunday morning warmed itself into a hot Colorado day. I floundered, flailed and stumbled while I tried to touch the connection between my father and His Country. I came as close to grasping the link as anyone in this world ever could, but I also came up way short.

It was like trying to grab ahold of a particle beam running between two nebular worlds with frozen mittens on my cold, sluggish hands. The thought saddened me further but also made me happy. Could I've handle the charged volts I would've received had I been successful? I broke even farther from his plan. I carried my father's body out of his final hunting grounds and everlasting kingdom. We owed it to my mother and the rest of our family. Many things dawned on me while I hauled his withered, timeworn body, which was now unmoving, rigid, and lifeless out of there. Fossil Ridge would always be his, and I couldn't name or think of any place like it for me.

When I became an old-man, ready to enter my eternal romping place, Dad would welcome me into his kingdom, but following his lead seemed wrong. Where would I go when it became time for me to unburden the tribe, as I slipped away from them in a hushed departure before dawn? The thoughts harangued me as I made our way back to his truck, using painstaking care to get us there in one piece while avoiding any more detours. I'd laid his body on the back seats when the answer came like a visage from my father who now, existed on the other side.

He guided me again or at least that's what I chose to believe after stumbling down the mountain. Dad revealed where I'd find my fantastic sanctuary in the netherworlds I would encounter when my expiration date became the final milestone upon the road. My Fossil Ridge would be found through the windows of my loving family's eyes when I said goodbye to them from my deathbed at a ripe old age. That's the way I pictured it in the daydream that held my mind together as we drove back home.

While I stood over him at his funeral, which he had voiced heated objection to every time the idea came up in conversation, I vowed to finish the promise. The tears that fell had started falling from my eyes when I first found him on his rocky outcropping in the wilderness of his country, still streamed from my eyes. The waterworks came with more fury and vengeance as I made the slight modification to our pledge. I whispered the renewal of my oath to him.

'Don't worry Dad; I'll get you back home. It'll be tricky, but I'll spread your ashes right where I found you before the first good tracking snows fall. Mom deserves to think she'll rest in peace with you forever. Hunt well great Elk Slayer... hunt well and try to save one for me.'