

**FALLING  
OFF  
THE  
EDGE  
OF  
NEBRASKA**

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Falling Off the Edge of Nebraska  
by Jackson Roy Livingston

Creative non-fiction

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For my family  
near and far





“Listen,” she says, punching the steering wheel, turning up the radio. The song is “Ode to Billie Joe.” I am 13. She is 21. It is 1967. My family is moving. Again. My sister and I are crammed in her rattling Fiat. She sings along, deep inhaling her cigarette between lines. My sister left home the day she turned eighteen. Since then I have only seen her on rare special occasions but here she is—gleeful, a bit manic, moving to a place neither of us have ever been before. My parents are traveling ahead, along with my Grandmother. My mother’s mother. I am thrilled to have my sister to myself. There is something about her that makes things feel a little out of control, in a good way. It is our first road trip together, just us.

Interstate 80 is our route for most of the way. We will ride it straight across Nebraska, into Iowa on our way to Missouri, taking full advantage of its eighty-miles-per-hour speed limit. Behind us is Arvada, a small suburb just west of Denver, Colorado cribbed tight near the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. My childhood is clasped to Arvada, ripe with bliss, littered with panic attacks.

Ahead is Hannibal, Missouri—an abyss where I will fall into eighth grade, friendless. I close my eyes and grip the door handle to push the worry away. My sister sings along to the song which folds itself into my anxiety. I am out of my mind. The windows are down, the mid-summer air roars around us as we buzz across western Nebraska. Its scrub brush prairie under a cathedral expanse of sky is familiar. I was born just north of here. Some people call this part of the Midwest God’s country. My family, devout atheists with a penchant for serious hard-left politics, claim this part of the Midwest as our country.

“Ode to Billie Joe” is a country music song by Bobbie Gentry. Released in 1967, it is her first and only big hit. During our trip, it is number one on the pop charts. Bobbie Gentry is from

Mississippi. Her accent is seductive, her voice husky, her songs southern gothic. In “Ode to Billie Joe” the titular boy kills himself the day after throwing “something” off a bridge with a girl who, the town preacher says, looked a lot like the song’s narrator. “It was a baby,” my sister declares more to herself than to me.

She stares ahead squinting, focused, suddenly speeding up. She swings the car to the left to pass an eighteen-wheeler. Our car shakes violently as she pushes it by. The roar engulfs. I look up. The truck’s gigantic tires loom over me, spinning dense rubber. I imagine, a kind of dare, the violent collision if either vehicle sways just a bit off course.

Interstate 80 runs from east to west across the United States from San Francisco, California, to Teaneck, New Jersey. It began construction in 1956 and was finished in segments, completed in 1986. It is part of the Interstate Highway System, a project championed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, former Supreme Commander of Allied Forces during World War Two. His campaign slogan was “I Like Ike.” He was late middle age, balding. He looked a lot like my father—as a child, I thought we all might be related. We had a dog named Ike. I only remember the dog by the few photographs I have seen. Our Ike was “put down” for biting strangers...or wait, no. Maybe he was hit by a car. Wait... Maybe both are true.

My memory of the details of my family’s history is compromised, colored by the shorthand stories told around holiday tables or over games of cards with my Mom and Grandmother. There was much that occurred before I came along late in my parent’s union. I am aware that most details are tweaked, tales abridged. No matter how they try, the magnetic undertow of true family history remains. It maintains the potential to pull any member under at any time. Down, backwards, out to sea. Lost. Those most in danger are those

who do not know where it is. When young, I hovered over air vents, chasing whispers attempting to hear the waves.

I am the youngest of four siblings by eight years. The sister I travel with is the next in line. She is rough and tumble. Fierce. Wild. I admire this. My mother calls her “high strung,” but never to her face. I saw her back my formidable father up against a wall during a heated dispute. Once, right after she left home, I learned her address and rode my bike way down busy Wadsworth Boulevard to her apartment. She was shocked to find me at her door grinning. She let me in for a moment. The place was a dump. There were sizable holes punched in the wall. Empty bottles were scattered around everywhere, filled with cigarette butts. I was mesmerized. She sent me away, admonishing me for coming over without asking first. I never did again.

The Interstate Highway System was sold to the public as an exciting infrastructure upgrade for civilian use. The system was really designed for Cold War defense purposes. Eisenhower wanted to be able to deploy the military to any area of the country on command. Fast. Considering the country was facing potential mass nuclear annihilation via guided missile—not some sea invasion, the idea was preposterous. There were nuclear silos scattered across the United States, in the Soviet Union, and in China. If anyone launched an attack, it would all over in a matter of minutes. Still, to this day the interstate highways remain one of the most popular mass public projects ever created.

Before this trip my sister wrecked a couple of cars. She was by then a regular at the Denver Tap, a well-known Colfax Avenue dive in west Denver. There she tended bar. As a teenager, she had a greasy haired boyfriend I admired because he looked like a total suave hood. He drove a slick sports car and cultivated



snakes kept in cages in his garage. Also, he made me and my friends cool swords out of wood. When she broke it off, he lay intoxicated screaming on our front lawn near midnight until he was carted away. There was always something unsettling and unsaid about my sister. Things I would never understand. If my main emotions were daydreaming and anxiety, hers by contrast were humor and aggression. But on this trip, we are in sync. She shelters me from the myriad threats homing in on me and for a short time wills them away. She is magic. When she sang along with that song it was *real* and *heartbreaking*.

Bobby Gentry left the country music business after a few more albums. She went to Las Vegas where she did show production design at casinos. She was good at it. Sick of being hounded over the mysterious narrative details that made “Ode to Billie Joe” compelling, she finally told an interviewer she didn’t know *what* was thrown from the bridge in the song and IT DIDN’T MATTER, because the point of the song was that no one in it cared about Billie Joe. Gentry retired and became a recluse. Success always has a shadow side—the bigger it is the longer the shadow. It can turn on you.

An unconsidered side effect of the Interstate Highway System was that it rerouted traffic from the long-established two-lane blacktop roads that crisscrossed the country. Many more people traveled further by car due to the Interstate. Pollution increased. The passenger trains eventually went bankrupt and were federalized into the skimpy Amtrak system. Many small-town businesses that had relied on tourism closed; families ruined. Not in York, Nebraska. It sits in the middle of the state, right off Interstate 80. As strong as ever, even stronger since it’s less isolated. My parents met in York, in high school. He the son of a mean Ozark-born dirt farmer, she with a head full of books and Hollywood. York was where they married soon after. It’s the key to our clan’s origin story.

What I didn't know then is my sister had given her own baby away. I still do not know the reason. The details remain locked away buried long ago. She sits on a generational fault line of women who were much too shamed and afforded few alternatives. Counting back, I realize this must have happened shortly before our trip. Her gone baby was a boy. Decades later, she revealed this to me and many others all at once by way of a declarative form letter, after she and her son successfully reunited. He and his family were quickly integrated into ours, where they remain, beloved and sound. At least this part of this story has a happy ending.

As we have relatives in York, it's where my sister and I land the first night of the trip. Road weary we roll in for dinner with our aunt, uncle and cousins. When I mention Bobby Gentry one of my cousins declares her continued deep allegiance to Elvis. "Heartbreak Hotel" is my favorite Elvis song. Released in 1955, when I was just three, I grew up with the song as part of our household soundtrack. It was Presley's first number one hit. I hear it in my head, its bass heavy beat, stabbing piano, the syncopated soul pain vocal ... *down at the end of Lonely Street / At Heartbreak Hotel / I get so lonely, I could die*. Back when Elvis performed "Heartbreak Hotel" live, it was primal—he leaned into it wounded, writhing. Plump lips lipstick smeared snarled; eyes ringed mascara thick. The crowd lunged at him predatory with desire. Sacrificial.

I played the record over and over at home all alone consumed by its harrowing wail of isolated breakup loss awash with suicidal pain. *I get so lonely... I could... die*, I sang along, looking in the mirror at myself contorting my face. I knew for absolute certain even then (and more so right now), no matter what my sister, Bobbie Gentry, or *anyone* said—*THIS* is the real reason Billy Joe MacAllister jumps off that fucking Tallahatchie Bridge.

Late that night in York, when sharing a room with my cousin, we slip out of his window into the swarm of indigo heat. We saunter over to a warehouse. He has access. Inside he says, *Look!* He pulls back a lid to reveal a barrel full of minnows he raised to sell for bait. They thrash around inside, some glassy and belly up. It is full, overloaded. Churning. The smell is putrid. Nauseous, I stumble backwards, out the door and trip to the ground. Sinking in the dirt, I stare up and get carried away. Maybe I am dreaming. Maybe this is a nightmare. Where is our car, where are the keys, how much gas is in it, how fast will it go, how far?

As I gasp, clutching myself, the Milky Way explodes above me in a thick band, tightening inside my skull. In the flash I seize up shaking. Out there spinning are the Big Dipper and Orion. The question is, will I remember how to follow them to find the North Star? If so, will I know exactly which way is east, which way is west? The brightly lit Interstate will take me either direction.



“Wake up,” my sister’s muffled voice comes through the door.

I pull myself up slow, elbow high, groggy. It is dark out. I touch my face, my arms, my legs. Everything is intact. Disoriented still, I grab my craggy jeans, pull on a fresh shirt. Cowboy plaid, pearl buttons probably bought from a Sears catalog by Mom.

“What time is it?” I ask, lacing high-top tennis shoes. My cousin is still asleep, locked in delirium adventure. His buzzcut scalp lay sweaty across the other pillow. I try not to think about his fishy hands.

I hold my head. Somewhere inside is hole tightening flickering.

I nab my battered small blue Samsonite suitcase and drag it to the kitchen. There my aunt, sporting a colorful loud print patterned orange floral housecoat, hands me juice. Her nails are red, she's a bit done up. She is a most glamorous aunt, elegant midwestern. Her husband, my uncle, my father's brother, is a straight shooter, a wiseacre. He says what he wants. A handsome slick who speaks out of the side of his mouth, a Mr. Magoo cackle. She met him long ago here in York. He was shooting pool. They were star struck. Teenagers who go the distance, still wild about each other. They make me feel good.

"Shotgun," I start joking as we head to the car. My sister stretches limber, pushing her long legs into the driver's seat. She is ready. Itching. I am just a bit taller than her, still clumsy in my new me. A little layer of fat bulging makes me self-conscious. I fold myself into the cab, sandwiched. We roll down the windows. Out there crickets pitch a lowdown chorus, while other early birds are making the rounds. We say our goodbyes.

"Here we go," she says peering through the windshield.

We shoot into day two. A lot of miles to go to make Hannibal by nightfall. There a motel room awaits us. And a new home three times the size of the old one. It hangs on a steep hill, white painted wood, looming empty. I have seen the pictures.

My sister swings the car slowly out of the driveway, then faster through the streets heading south. Back on the highway, she accelerates. As we take the I-80 on ramp East, I think: *This feels like a movie.* I imagine I am a camera. In Walker Percy's book *The Moviegoer* the main character, jittery with existential debris, roams New Orleans sniffing for meaning. His main problem? He can't accept life as real when living

it, unless it reminds him of something he has seen in cinema.

There is a thud. “Ugh,” she says, “road-kill.” It was already hit, she didn’t kill it. Not that if she did kill it we would stop or worry much. When you are traveling at this speed on these highways, it’s all creatures for themselves. There will be losses. Beady-eyed possums with rat pink tails, old shaggy badgers, god awful skunks, dumb rabbits galore, startled pheasants flushed. Frozen deer tan hurtling across the bow, bashing through windshields. Humans present the greatest danger. All of us. In 1967, there will be 50,724 highway fatalities in the United States.

My sister shifts in her seat, settles in focused. She lights a fresh cigarette, unperturbed. Bad odds, *So what?* she shines.

The highway is fairly open through here this time of day. Just sister, me, and the truckers in the pre-dawn night. Eastern Nebraska streams by. Slight hills begin to show. The vegetation increases, it’s a greener horizon. Above us, the North Platte River races to the Missouri River too. Back where we started, the South Platte slices through Denver feeding the river above. When I was younger the South Platte once flooded so hard and fast it blew out bridges and cut Denver in two. As the water raged it expanded wide across the city flood plains. My other, my older sister, was stranded on the other side. My mother worried wanted her home. That sister waited patiently for the danger to recede. She had by then learned to follow her instincts, not my parents’ demands.

This same older sister stayed behind in Denver. Even as we drive she mourns our move. I miss her already. Yes, the sister with me is wild sometimes, an inspired thorny hothead, but my other just a bit older sister is just as wild in her own way. She just doesn’t get caught as much. She seems to operate by way of deeper empathy. These sisters are close, but the

flare ups can be sudden and intense. I have watched them all my life. Two great panthers. My older sister supplies me with more knowledge, things of lasting influence. She gives me records by Bob Dylan, the book *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. She takes me to see *The Graduate*. More too. Because of both my sisters I am ahead of the game, more confident of the idiosyncrasies inside.

That said, our move, *this move*, severs our family's ties. After this liberation, we will never be as close as we were. In the future, I always flee for my life. On repeat for decades. I am the selfish child. I am the one who demands my ME, the me I always imagine and then reimagine. The one my mother promised, the one my sisters assured me was coming, the one my father learned to accept, the one that perplexed my brother until the day my father died.

That South Platte flood took my Great Uncle's farmhouse. It was a punishing storm. He had to flee, dodge tornadoes up there where he lived rustic in Castle Rock. It washed his life away. But not him. He always lived a Spartan life alone. Made his way with a polio-damaged leg that he refused to let get in his way. When he came to town to visit us on holidays he smoked Camel non-filters and enjoyed poker after dinner. When I learned enough to legit win a buck or two from his wallet, he gave me the nod. My Great Uncle drove a sturdy blue pick-up truck I coveted. Then a day came when that truck was crushed at a nearby familiar railroad crossing. The freight train took him too. I got the report by phone call. My family never considered such gruesome incidents a surprise. I guess over the years, generation by stoic generation, we learned to expect them.

In the car I have been lollygagging, dozing but now awake. I look at my hands. They are thin with long fingers, near transparent

skin. Pre-tremor. Good for guitar. My mother's hands. My sister is a kick, enjoying the I-80 buzz, a road junkie gleam. She asks about last light, suspicious. "Where did you go?" she asks flat staring straight ahead. "Nowhere really," I keep it to myself. No way to explain. If I could and not crack I would. I admit it, more often than not I *do* go for applause. That's my story right there.

Our radio blasts. The signal is clear, this means the station is big city close. We sing along to "Happy Together." The Turtles. It's pop confection, fodder for so many then teen dances no doubt. Me, I prefer minor chords, bruised lyrics, loutish singers. I seek reflection, Dionysian. I seek moisture spread tight then tighter across the pulse within my neck.

In *The Center Will Not Hold*, the 2017 documentary about then 82-year-old writer Joan Didion, her nephew, the actor Griffin Dunne, quizzes her about the band The Doors, who she had profiled (about the time of this trip). She responds swift, arms flailing wide in an ecstatic gesture. "*Bad boys*," she declares, succinct, pleased—her eyes gleaming. Saint Joan now, then traveled unseen to see. The seal-tight prose, always taut arching pure. And then there is that corvette, those sunglasses. Once I saw her thin bird hands perch in a President's black hands—a devastatingly perfect sight. I feel the wet on my face.

We shoot by Lincoln, the state capital, and round the north of it. Lincoln is the city where my brother and sisters were born, where my family lived a few years before I was born eight years later. Where my grandmother lived, after her husband died ten years before I was born. I am named after him. I know little else about Lincoln, about any details of what occurred to my family there. I wonder, as we pass, about Lincoln. But not enough to ask my sister. Maybe I think the time before me is of little consequence. Yes, in case you wonder, I am that self-centered.

Oh, but I do know this. Lincoln is the birthplace of Charlie Starkweather and Carol Ann Fugate. In 1957, when I was 4 (my family was in Alliance, Nebraska), 18-year-old Charlie murdered 13-year-old Carol Ann's disapproving parents (and her baby sister). They escaped and ran across Nebraska into the badlands of Wyoming. There they were finally caught. Along the way, Charlie killed seven more. When captured, Carol Ann said she had been kidnapped. She was a kid after all. Charlie got the chair. "Put her on my lap," he said, acting all James Dean. She got life. Served 17 1/2 years.

Buried in the heart of our family album are photographs of the couple smiling the day they were returned to Lincoln. The images sit amid my mother's people. My grandmother developed the photographs; it was her profession. She must have made spare prints off press negatives. The images were important to her. When she told me, it was all in the details. Each time she told me, anger swept through her.

Numerous films are loosely based on the Starkweather/Fugate incident, including *Badlands* and *Natural Born Killers*. The Bruce Springsteen song "Nebraska" is too. For my family, it is personal. A cautionary tale about the monsters that lurk in the Western night.

The map says that Lincoln is right there. I see it. Now it is gone. For good. That's all a mirage. I clasp my hands together. My sister grips the wheel, hits the high beams. The highway lights up. The fast-moving white lines whip by, they hypnotize.

At a rest stop I go to get a Coke. I hear the locals talking. Their accent is the same as my brother, sisters, mother, father, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends. I don't hear their accents. They sound like me. I sound like them. Listen to me in twenty years. I will lose that accent. I will go too far, too long. Wherever I will live, I will be a tourist. I will never settle. I will always



get lost. This part of the story may explain why you and I will never be close.

When I was in sixth grade attending Lawrence Elementary in Arvada, my class stayed at a camp on the side of a small mountain not so far from our school for one week. There our teacher gave us each a compass. He thought he taught us how to use it. We raced up to the top of a steep ridge. At the summit a boy with a mouth of horse teeth raised our hand-drawn flag in victory. Then everyone went back. Everyone except a friend and me. We decided to get just the right amount of lost. As we meandered around we discussed our parents' coming worry. Within an hour, we tired of our faux crisis and returned. No one noticed us missing, except one girl who wrinkled up her ermine face and clasped me tight. She managed a few tears. I draw her now. On the drawing I write the word **MERCY**. That's something, isn't it?

A compass uses the earth's magnetic field to point north, but the Earth's magnetic field undulates, slightly shifting every single day. The magnetic north hovers about one thousand miles south of Earth's true geographic north. Our teacher didn't teach us that a compass just divines an approximation. It is a tool that works fine for the short trek but is disastrous on the long haul.

*Where am I?* I think as I blink back into consciousness. I have been thinking of water. The waters ahead. I wonder what kind of fish lives in huge rivers. Flatheads, Bass, Bluegill, Carp, Gar, Sturgeon, Sucker, Walleye. I had a book on fish. I dislike fish—big gaping mouths, gills, eyes on each side. They are hideous. I hate fishing because of fish. I like whales. Read *Moby Dick*. Now. Watch the movie as I did late at night with commercial breaks selling dog food. The White Whale was my grade school nickname. I wrote the name on my book covers like a hard crush.

*There ahead*, my sister nods, motioning forward. “Omaha,” she says. A big road sign proclaims it like an upcoming attraction. “*Omm-a-haa*,” I say, repeating after her, reading the sign. I like it better in three extended syllables. A mantra. Suddenly the *haa* sound tightens deep inside my chest. I lean forward and scoop up the crinkled map at my feet. The one we use to chart our way. It flutters up into my lap, threatens escape. I hold it down, elbow flattened.

There it is. Omaha. I rub my index finger across the city over and over and over. An attempt to erase. All I manage is a dull oily sheen. “Progress,” says my sister full of affirmation. She is beating the odds this trip. She is making time.

Right then it’s daybreak. The sun rises, shuddering across the horizon, first red, then wicked orange. We continue to hug Interstate 80 now, heading towards Iowa, where we will go through until we drop down towards Missouri. The few morning clouds shimmer into a mirage of burnt gray, filtering color. The scene is hallucinatory. Like in *The Bible*. The 1967 film. It is all I know. I have not read the real Bible. My mother kept me from religion, from church, from the book. A friend’s Christian parents wept over the loss of my soul. The previous summer, when I was twelve, their daughter, who was then four years my senior, pushed my mouth down into her sin.

*The Bible*, directed by John Huston, is based on the book of Genesis. All new to me. It looked great in Technicolor. It made me wonder though—are those who are connected to God soothed? I seek soothing always too. Soon it will include intoxicating liquids, inhalants, pills, sex—the usual I guess. Then again, the simple things. A plunge into a cold spring off a rope, the blink of a wild turtle, that special

bend in Ralston Creek (the place my ashes are to go, don't forget). The feel of *that one's* hair. Four dogs, now gone.

I have a friend now who rallies to save frogs who leap mistakenly across a deadly section of a local highway to mate. She buckets them to and fro, in the nick of time, like clockwork. Their savior.

In the Fiat, I keep looking in the rearview mirror. There is an absence. No mountains. My sister waves this off because she doesn't care. She is into the present with a force that moves right along with her. "Hey, tomorrow, watch out," everything about her says. For me it is still past yesterday. When there were mountains. When I was 5-years-old I looked at them every day out our big picture window. I thought the great Rockies were large forever asleep dinosaurs. I would point, answering my father's question, "There, there, over there is *west*." Yep. I still miss mountains.

*How the West was Won* is a sprawling film shot for Cinerama. It has nearly every famous male star of the era, and many of the women. It tells the usual whitewash Western I know now is wrong. But as a kid in the theater, surrounded by the huge screen and the multi-channel sound, I was enthralled. Cinerama died soon after. It was an unsustainable spectacle. Like life.

Films and TV oddly heightened the view of the landscape I grew up in. People tell me now how they love to go to Colorado to go hiking, skiing, all that. When older, when I returned, I used mountains to play risk in. To drive fast, to drink in the high altitude. I launched from the foothills, where I grew up a prospector with a three-speed bike. From the start, there was something unpredictable inside. My family my shelter. Gone, baby, gone.

*East of Eden* is an intense film derived from the Steinbeck novel

which uses the Cain and Abel story as a vague blueprint. It was directed by Elia Kazan. In it, two brothers compete for their father's attention. Cal, played by James Dean in his first film role, wails and sulks histrionic—desperate for paternal love. He searches out his estranged mother, now a rich Madame who left her religious husband long ago, abandoning the boys. Dean was so anguished while playing the role, he frequently broke down between takes. Kazan waited, then pushed him into it again and again.

I was a momma's boy. Words were easy between us. My siblings say I'm spoiled. Rotten. There is a shadow there. "Look," she would say, pointing out all the brilliant artifice. "Look" at that film by Orson Wells, or "look" at that painting by so and so at the big museum. We hovered together over color plates that came weekly, placed in a mail order book. *Great Works of Art*, the cover said in bold. I was never a rebel. I just followed the script. I didn't know an Oedipal war was being waged. A war I was winning. Inside that war, casualties. Sometimes I heard my sisters hiss, "*She should have left him.*" It would be decades before I knew the truth. This part of the story reveals the damage to the foundation.

Our bug-splattered Fiat whines through gears as it handles the pushing wind. My sister follows the Intersate-80 lane banking us north up through Omaha City. There we are on the south side, Over there, people, houses, industry, a zoo. Then—the entrance to the sturdy new bridge that spans the broad Missouri river comes into view. We approach the incline. In cheap sunglasses, like some Steve McQueen badass in *Bullitt*, my sister revs her car to GO. She is ready for this.

Suddenly, I catch fever. I roll my window all the way down and push my head out direct into the oncoming rush of air. The shimmering blue sky ahead blurs, my eyes water.

When we get to the very center of the bridge, the roar engulfs us in embrace. I thrust my right arm out then too. I hold it steady as the wind wings my cuffed hand up and down. “Look,” I shout. *Yes*, my sister glances, *that is our future*. Over the bridge we go, falling off the edge of Nebraska.

We cross over in Iowa. Up ahead big grain silos rise gleaming minimal cathedrals launched in the spreading sky.

“Hey, that was just the beginning,” my sister says triumphant. Her eyes wide scan the blossoming potential the fresh rush of land holds. “I know,” I say, “I know.”

Every day after the move to Hannibal I wake up considering our invasion. I look ahead and note escape. There I pack dreams geared to my alone. My sister has a new Ford Mustang, a new job. She is happy and I am happy to have her back home pleased anew. We ride in her new car; it has a eight track tape player. We listen to what we want. When we want. She slips me my first beer then another, tall cans of Budweiser, as we head to see the D. A. Pennebaker documentary *Don't Look Back*. It is at an art movie house, down in a hip part of big city Saint Louis. In the film a young strung out Bob Dylan, between chilling sets of potent songs, snarls at everyone wild haired behind thick sunglasses. I take notes.

I soar now. My hair long, the air thick southern along the big muddy. New here I remake myself for today. My previous me is only what I choose to reveal. I now wear tight jeans, thick boots, black shirts—only black, and a special long chore coat jean jacket. It is a prized item gifted to me from the

cool high school guys who work at the Cave, a major tourist attraction. There is a girl now. Look, right there. She sways and whispers into me on the couch. Plush lips ice eyes. I lay into her curves. Thick blond. I'm now taller than my father, than my mother, than my sisters, closer to my big brother but he is not here. I don't know it yet but everywhere ahead there will be a nurse who has my number.

Always my pocket nests a sharp knife. It was there from the start of this story. Hidden. It is there right now. I need protection see. What do you think of me now?



Wait, before you answer, I must tell you this.

He, my father, threatened to push my head through a wall. I, just fourteen, am late getting home true but barely. I have been out with my sister innocent drinking cherry coke. No, he was not drunk. Never was. His rage is new, a raw bomb blast. My mother in shock silence. Traitor. My sister quick steps right between us. "Not him," she spits into his face, "not after what you did to us." Her voice a dense fury. He deflates, collapses to his knees, one pale arm twitching holding up the wall. A sudden contorted broken man my father falls. My mother becomes a shrill siren hovering over his whimpers. I flee. Hysterical. My sister follows and holds me to hush in the basement dark. How long? A minute, an hour, a day? I don't know...it felt like forever.

He never did it again. We never speak of it again. Instead the opposite happens. As I increasingly harden, and run, spit, fume, and lash out fueled by hormones and a rush to escape fast into an independent tomorrow he remains

compassionate, present, each time reaching out to me. Willing to weep his feelings now. He keeps trying to hold me close, no matter my push. He handed over the keys, the car, my life. He gave me lifelong home and highway. He learned to tap dance across the garden and deliver tenderness complete with a cash rush whenever the dark fell. It seems my once frightening father chose redemption. He had to I guess; it was that or a dearth bound emotional grave for us all.

I say so when I deliver the elegy at his funeral four decades later in Denver. I composed it the night before. The words came easy. By then I knew the bigger scope of his reformation. This by way of my older sister, as we discussed him, a then old broken man pacing a tiny room alone lost in an upscale nursing home, Lakewood, Colorado. She, a healer, a truth teller, steels herself and recounts the transgressions inflicted on her, others.

My siblings are fierce in the face of these facts. They endured monster years. Violations. Physical. Emotional. They fought back, burnt it down, torched the devil to survive. They created glorious years within without too. Memories of full of prairies and sunshine and promise too. No victim tag for them. They will not be reduced to a simple narrative, not reduced to this story not any story. They are splendid. They are my heroes. We remain forever together tight. There they are in the front row pew. Spouses and cousins fan out beside them. Community, more. Numerous men my father led. Men and women he served with. Men and women he served. His casket to my left is sleek as our best car ever, the Plymouth Fury III he taught me how to pilot. Walking to the pulpit I recall him at the wheel pushing it forwards, patient with me as I stutter to freedom pummeled by an ocean of paradox. The monster of him he murdered lay buried deep beneath us. I was the lucky one. I grew up nourished in safer top-soil. *I was his second chance.*

When I speak, it is steady, it is emphatic—it is *for my sisters, my brother too*. My mother is eight miles to the west engulfed in dementia, swarmed with visions. She is now a skeleton who dances spectral. She sees fire rise all over us. Goes, “Ahhhhhh.” This loss took my father, he gave up, finally fell into a septic death. I am lit by a blue stained window, extend my arm palm up into the thin somber air, arch my finger as I conduct. I tell all he tried to atone for his *sins*. Sins that were many and deep. That he worked at it for decades. That he gifted back to one and all in this process. That because of him a hundred thousand plus children in need received free shiny fully repaired/recycled bikes that flew them to freedom. That my father was, in the end, a horribly flawed good man. It is the truth. The people nod. What I don’t say is the bigger truth, no matter what good he did: *it was too late*. This part of the story ends with a question. What happens once your blood turns to gasoline?





If I said things got better, it would not be a lie. If I said things got worse, it would not be a lie. There is a next stop and the next and the next. There is always another ride out there. Another move.

This is the bigger story. The story that *never* stops. All along the way there are frantic men gnawing metal, awash in fluids plagued peddling nausea. There is a hissing devil spreading wreckage everywhere. Over there on the tracks in Moline, a wild night in Topeka, across four lanes near Cheyenne. All my life women are lit with promise. They take flight too. Back and forth—across the great plains—the great divide. We all are a part of the cadence of these rambles day and night across Interstate Highways. Back and forth in time.

