A Sentimental Journey To A Place I've Been Before

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We played the games that children typically play on car trips. Some of the games were public ones: the alphabet game, twenty questions. Some of them, some of those that I played, were private. My finger was a scythe, a sword, a gun, with which I methodically mowed down the telephone poles that, like the animated broomsticks in "The Sorcerer’s Apprentice," marched past the car window in a precise and insidious, endless line. Another private game: In this house — this white farmhouse two hundred yards beyond the highway — there lives...Who? Quick! Hiram B. Abernathy, his wife and three daughters. I shall marry the oldest, Cynthia, who is eight (like me) and lives in that second-story room that looks upon the highway, and I shall be a brilliant lawyer, author, ex-President, living in whatever tiny farm town is nearby, a conveniently rustic refuge for one so internationally famous as I. Then the house is gone, no longer visible through the rear window of the Ford station wagon, and my fabricated future is as suddenly unravelled.

And when the sun had set and the night discovered us still hurtling westward, I played another game. The baby — Drew, then in later years, Susan — would eventually fall asleep in Mom's arms, and somewhere Dad would pull off the highway and fold down the back seats to make a bed for Ray and me. And once I could identify the deep, slow breaths of the baby in the front seat and of Ray in the back, the game was to convince them, the two adults, that I was asleep as well. There was a science to imitating sleep. To breathe in unison with these others would be too artificial, so I forced my breaths to fit between the audible exhalations of my older, sleeping brother, our breaths trading off like the meshing of gears. Fine points of deception included the occasional long, wet sniff; a sigh; a shifting of position every twenty minutes or so. When you concentrated this hard on seeming to be asleep, it was, I believed, quite impossible to actually fall asleep. It was a lie that required stamina, patience, as I suppose swimming the English Channel must. I tried to relax between sighs and squirms by watching whatever stars appeared through the foot-or-so of glass I could see from my prone position. I doubt I could pull it off today, this make-believe sleep. I've lost the discipline. But then, some twenty years ago, I could do it for miles and miles, keeping one ear open for the
sounds of “Are the boys asleep?” “Yes, I think so,” which signaled victory.

Best of all was to arrive. Then I’d hear the station wagon tires trade the rhythmic drone of the highway for the more dramatic crunch and pitch of the motel’s gravel parking lot. The car would stop. Doors would open. I would hear my grandmother’s voice, the throaty bark of my grandfather. When my turn came, my father would slide his hand beneath me, pull my limp form from the car, and only then would I open my eyes wide and say, “Surprise! I’m not asleep!”

As far back as I can remember, recognizing relatives and the places where they lived, my mother’s mother and stepfather, Bob, lived in a motel in Erick, Oklahoma, a town of 1500 fifteen minutes from the Texas Panhandle. Three or four times a year we would make the trek down Highway 66 from Oklahoma City to visit them.

There were, as I recall, about twenty-six units to the motel. Behind the office, from Oklahoma City to visit them. There were, as I recall, about twenty-six units to the motel. Behind the office, from which, at night, one would hear coyotes, train whistles, the whine of semis out on the highway. With the help of one or two maids, who were always replaced before I could learn their names or faces, my grandparents cleaned the rooms, did the laundry, tended the swimming pool, registered guests. I realize now that managing the motel was not my grandparents’ idea of “the good life.” (Today, Grandmother lives in Oklahoma City where, at seventy-two, she still works fulltime as a secretary-bookkeeper for a city councilman and real estate investor, who finds her so indispensable that he gives her thousand-dollar bonuses and embarrasses her with praise at formal banquets held in her honor.) My grandmother’s memories of the motel — the drudgery of the chores, the inconvenience of waking up at 1:00 a.m. to register a sleepy trucker, the distance between Erick and her children’s homes — are her own. My memories, I suspect, are quite different.

To me, the motel was a palace, a place of luxury and adventure.

We boys could, if Mom and Dad would condone such extravagance, sleep in a different room every night and watch T.V. in bed. Summers, we swam every day in the pool, sometimes both morning and night. Town kids, I knew, had to pay fifty cents in order to swim. And although we were the strangers, the out-of-towners, we were also the privileged, the elect. We swam free. Once I was dunked in the deep end by one of these town kids, an older boy with the wicked leer of a bully. I crossed the gravel parking lot in my bare feet, coughing, crying, and sputtering, to squeal to my uncle, who was also staying at the motel then. I got a child’s vindictive pleasure by watching my uncle pull the bully out of the water by one arm and send him home on his bike, a dirty blue bike, the kid protesting “I didn’t do nothing!” while he pedaled away, his hair still dripping on the gravel and a towel flapping around his waist. A ridiculously skinny child, wet and goose-pimpled, choking on tears, I probably felt a warm sense of justice.

My brother Ray and I went exploring. Behind the motel was a cotton field, in which the lucky detective might discover a rabbit bone or rotted piece of leather harness. (We were city kids, remember.) An ancient wooden structure, The Old Barn, stood like an oasis in the center of the field. Year after year we’d hike to the barn, muster our courage to go inside — it was haunted, of course — to inspect the rusted tools that hung on the walls, the spilled, mouse-ridden grain that covered the floor. Year after year we’d gauge the holes in the roof, the number of sideboards gone, patiently following the progress of this Acropolis on its slow but steady topple to horizontal.

There were other adventures. Across the highway, early in June, the fireworks stand would open. In the city we could not even shoot fireworks, much less walk to a fireworks stand, where we could lean across and discuss at leisure the relative value of lady fingers, black cats, popbottle rockets, Roman candles, booby-traps, spinners, and whistlers. A certain amount always had to be spent on sparklers and snakes, which we would ignite when Mom and Dad were around to convince them that our tastes in explosives were safe and pedestrian. The rest we lit out back, chucking the firecrackers down ant hills and exploding whatever trash we might retrieve from the black, cast-iron trash barrel behind the laundry room.

In Erick, while hunting quail with my father and grandfather, I shot a rifle for the first time. Notwithstanding those hours spent on the black stallion with the red, flared nostrils, who galloped beside the swingset, his springs swaying and creaking to the bounce of a five-year-old cowboy or the pull of a strong prairie wind, at the motel I rode a real horse for the first time — or at least it’s my first vivid memory of a horse ride, my grandfather placing me between the saddlehorn and himself on a borrowed mare, then galloping the length of the motel and back while I waited for the ride’s end, when I would be able to draw, at last, a breath. It was here that I learned to tie my shoes. It was here that I was sent, alone, for a glorious week long “vacation” from the pesty girl who lived behind us in the city, after the summer morning when I had in desperation painted her hands bright yellow. It was here, in that little back room which in my memory is nothing more than a bed and a window, that I heard a Voice.

At the motel I held my first job. If a guest buzzed the switchboard for a bucket of ice or a newspaper, and I was awake, I would carry it to his room. Even this was an adventure, confronting strange people in the room where they would sleep. At first I didn’t know about tipping. A man in bare feet gave me a quarter for bringing the bucket of ice. I tried to give it back. One could get paid for this? In the morning I would accompany Grandmother on her cleaning rounds, helping her to strip each room of dirty linens and towels, throwing these into a white wooden cart we wheeled from room to room. Wastebaskets had to be emptied, ashtrays wiped, dirty glasses replaced with clean ones wrapped in crinkly protective paper. Meanwhile my grandfather would be vacuuming the swimming pool. And at mid-morning our room-cleaning crew would meet the pool-cleaning crew for a bottle of Dr. Pepper and a sit in the metal lawn chairs that lined the walk between rooms.

Permit me now two final musings, self-indulgent as all of these have been, but which — if I’m lucky — may pull these kaleidoscopic fragments into some sort of pattern.

One is a final memory, of a night when riding back to Oklahoma City from Erick the sleeping game backfired. There Ilay, curled beside my brother in the bed of the station wagon, carefully regulating my breaths and gazing out the window, when suddenly I saw lights — a brightly lit house upon a hill. I begged my parents to stop the car. A
red neon across the front of the three-storied farmhouse flashed "Haunted House." We woke my brothers, paid our admission fees, and went inside. We saw ghosts, real ghosts, flitting from room to room, passing us on the stairs. I must have been at that age when one is no longer enamored by dinosaurs, not yet enamored by girls, but fascinated instead by monsters. These ghosts were not scary — they were a tourist attraction, after all, convincingly other-worldly, ethereal, but no more threatening than the glass-enclosed rattlesnakes one might find in the “Reptile Zoo” advertised farther down the highway. (Years later, when I took a trip to Disneyland with some college friends, I felt a sense of deja vu riding through Disney’s specter-crammed Haunted Mansion.) I was asleep, of course. The house was a dream. The next morning I awoke in my own bed in the city, and couldn’t wait to talk about the haunted house we’d toured the night before. I asked everyone: Mom, Dad, Ray, Drew — nobody remembered it. I could still describe it, the lights that had attracted us from the highway, the layout of the individual rooms. They said I must have dreamed it. Dreamed it? How could I have dreamed it when I had been feigning sleep? I had only been pretending, I explained; I had been awake all the while; they could go ahead and admit the house was real.

They wouldn’t. For nearly a week I held my conviction that the haunted house had actually existed. In fact, I may still be unconvinced that it did not. If it was only a dream, why do I remember it so clearly, more vividly, in fact, than I remember real places like Cal’s Cafe or the Erick Library? (I can remember a book I read there, a book about pirates, more vividly than I recall the building itself.) Perhaps any day now my parents will call me up and confess. “Rick,” they’ll say, “we’ve been meaning to tell you about that haunted house out on Route 66.” This confusion between the dream and reality is a little like what happens when you write, it seems to me. Hereafter, my memories transformed into the bright color and concrete shape of language, I may have trouble separating the memory itself, the memory pure and chaotic and divorced from language, from these careful, word-bound renderings of it. Perhaps I lose these memories, or at least transform them, even as I struggle to preserve them.

My final thought is not so elegiac. I am twenty-eight years old, in my third year as a full-time college instructor. After spending four years in St. Louis, Missouri, I now live in Weatherford, which is halfway between Oklahoma City to the east, and Erick to the west. I am content fulfilling the duties of a position to which I was, both literally and figuratively, called. It is a job I enjoy. (One can get paid for this?) I am content living in a town which for years I knew only as a slowing of speed and a procession of storefronts on the way to somewhere else, a brief interruption on the way to a place of luxury, love, and adventure. And while I have not yet met Cynthia, the girl of that upstairs farmhouse room, nor practice law, nor have any pretensions of a fame worth hiding under a bushel basket on the anonymous plains of Rural Somewhere, I cannot help but wonder if some forgotten episode of that childhood travel game of point-the-finger-and-define-the-future has at last, like the sleeping game, backfired and come true.

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