

THE SMALL THINGS

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We rode three across in the bench seat of my father's Ford pickup. I was at the wheel, with my Uncle Bob wedged between Dad and me. We had ridden the interstate north and west about 15 miles out of Great Falls and now were following a winding, rutted two-lane road to the top of the Fairfield Bench, to a place my father hadn't visited in nearly fifty years.

"Slow it down, Craig," Dad said. "Let me see this stuff."

I pulled back my heavy foot, and Dad loosened his memories and, in time, his tongue.

FOR THE WHOLE OF MY LIFE, my taciturn father has been the embodiment of the West as I think of it. Born in Conrad, Montana, and reared in and around Great Falls, he overcame a childhood drenched in neglect and violence and made himself into a better man than any example he had known. Conjure any well-worn description of frontier living – pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, muscling a living from the soil – and you can put it around his neck. You hear a lot about self-made men, but for Dad, it's not a throwaway line. Whatever he is, whatever he's accomplished, he's managed it largely on the strength of his own determination. He's not perfect; he was a poor husband and a lacking father in many ways, but even now, at 71 years old, he keeps showing up. He stays in the game.

I've spent much of my adulthood trying to piece together Dad's life in those years before he became my father. The details haven't come easily. Dad has rarely been inclined to part with them, and others who know the story have taken it to their graves. Over the years I managed to accumulate enough pieces to believe I had the outline. On our trip to the Fairfield Bench, I found out that I scarcely had even that.

The first indication of just how much I didn't know came when Bob said something about his wife—Delores, Dad's sister—and their older brother, Duaine, having spent time in an orphanage.

"I don't think you were there," Bob said to Dad.

Dad spoke quietly. "No, I was with my dad."

My head whipped around. I'd heard, or maybe I'd assumed, that my paternal grandfather, Fred, had walked out on the family when Dad was two or three years old. But here was Bob, telling me that it had been a proper divorce and that Dad's mother had rejected the children. So Fred, an uneducated day laborer, had taken them on, until it became obvious that he couldn't cope with three children and the demands of work. The two elder kids, Duaine and Delores, went to the orphanage, and Dad, the baby of the family, stayed with his father.

In the meantime, their mother, Della, had remarried. Her new husband, Dick Mader, owned a dairy farm up on the bench and saw in his wife's scattered children a source of cheap, controllable labor, so Duaine and Delores were whisked from the orphanage and ended up on the farm.

My mind reeled at these revelations casually dropped into conversation. Delores and Duaine are long since gone, so the story rests with Bob and Dad. It had taken a trip to the Fairfield Bench—something I had insisted on—to draw it out of them.

ON DAD'S COMMAND, we stopped along a fence line, and he pointed out the window at a windbreak in the distance.

"That's it," he said.

"You sure?" Bob asked.

“That’s it.”

Dad is well into his long slide into dotage, and the steel trap of his mind doesn’t close as hard or as fast as it once did. But he damn well knew the place where his childhood had been stolen from him.

I turned onto the muddy road and headed for the trees.

HERE IT IS, as Dad told it that day: When he was about ten years old, he told his father that he would like to meet his brother and sister. Fred said he knew where they were and that he would take Dad to the farm for a weeklong visit.

Della and Dick had other ideas about the duration.

When Fred showed up to get Dad a week later, Dick locked the little boy in the basement and met Fred at the road. He carried a shotgun, all the better to send Fred on his way. Three children could accomplish a hell of a lot more work than two, and Dick aimed to keep Dad close, be it with a gun or a fist or a horse whip.

These memories got a full airing in the pickup, and they became fodder for an odd bit of one-upmanship between Dad and Bob, whose own childhood had been dominated by a father who found it easier to hit his kids than to talk to them.

“I’ve seen the business end of a belt,” Bob said.

“A belt?” Dad said. “A two-by-four. A pitchfork. Dick would come at me with anything he could get his hands on.”

NO ONE CAME OUT TO GREET US IN THE YARD AT THE FARM. Respectful of someone else’s property, Dad sat in the cab of the pickup and took in the scene. I had seen the place before, in a crinkled black-and-white aerial photograph stashed away among the things Dad has given me over the years. In living color, the scene took my breath away. The milking parlor and the ramshackle chicken coops were still there, virtually unchanged. So was the sturdy little farmhouse, a simple white with dark green trim. The insulation around the foundation of the house had been chipped away by weather and the passage of time. The place was tiny, and my heart ached all over again for Dad. With a stepfather and a mother and two siblings sharing that small space, he had nowhere to escape and nothing that could belong only to him.

I watched Dad, and I tried to imagine what this place must have seemed like to the child he once was, stuck under the thumb of a brutal stepfather. I hoped he might find the words, sitting there and looking at it all through the lens of a half century, but those thoughts remained his alone. Revelations couldn’t be found in his face or his voice.

Finally, he said, “Well, we’d better go.”

BY HIS OWN ACCOUNT, Dad ran away a lot in those childhood years. He once showed up on the doorstep of his Uncle Ross’ house, his back flayed open by Dick’s whip. Ross was sympathetic, but he feared Dick, and ours was not the sort of family that told each other how to raise their kids. Ross gave Dad a place to sleep that night, and other nights Dad found other places, but for a long time, he always ended up back at the farm.

One day when he was thirteen or fourteen years old, he finally bolted for good, escaping to Great Falls. During the day, he would walk the streets, ducking into stores and stealing canned food. At night, he’d find shelter where he could, sometimes in an aunt or uncle’s house. He would let himself in and sleep on the couch. The kin learned to let him be; if they woke him, he would run for fear of being turned over to Dick.

After a few weeks, he ended up on a farm in Three Forks, doing odd jobs and being attended to by a kind family that kept him shielded from Dick, who was still looking for him. After a year or two, Dad told the farmer that he would like to see his father again, and the man agreed to find Fred and take Dad to him. A few weeks later, word came: Fred was in Butte.

More than fifty years later, Dad’s voice broke and his eyes floated in tears as he revealed what happened next. They were the only emotions he betrayed in telling the story.

“The farmer told me, ‘I’ll drive you to Butte and once you’re there, I’ll put you in a cab and follow you to your father’s house. Once I see that he’s come out to get you, I’m gone.’ ”

In a singular act, that Three Forks farmer, whose name has been lost to the intervening years, did for Dad what no one else could be troubled to do: He acted in the best interest of the child.

When Dad came of age, Fred saw him off to the Navy and then disappeared again, and life was finally Dad’s to make of it what he could.

AT THE NEXT FARMHOUSE OVER, a retired gentleman came out and met us. He walked us around his place, and we stared out over fallow fields at Square Butte rising in the distance, far away and yet seemingly close enough to touch. The farmer remembered Dick. The old dairy farm, he said, was still owned by the family that had bought it from Dick in the early ’60s. The farmer’s wife, meanwhile, kept looking at Dad. When Dad finally introduced himself, her eyes lit up. She had been a little girl when Dad ran away for good, and her family had helped him make it off the bench and into Great Falls. She remembered.

I found it hard to tamp down the emotion. Dad wasn’t just a piece of meat in those years. He had worth, and some people saw it and did the small things they could to recognize it. He mattered.

FOR YEARS, I wondered why my father held me at arm’s length, never revealing too much, never letting me get too close. Knowing what I know now, I no longer harbor such questions. He neither raised a hand in anger toward me nor offered much affection, and the sum of that—keeping violence and tenderness away from me—was worth the cost, he must have figured.

I was three when he and my mother split in 1973, and I spent most of my growing-up years in a suburb of Fort Worth, Texas, held close by Mom and my stepfather, who showered me with love and support. I spent summers in the rural West with Dad, who worked as an itinerant well digger. I bore casual witness to hardscrabble lives that I never saw back home. I was there, I saw it, but I wasn’t really part of it. At the end of the summer, there was always an airplane to take me back to Texas and the cocoon of suburbia.

Even so, I would sometimes close my eyes and try to imagine where Dad was and what he was doing, and I wondered if he wondered about me. Now I know that he did.

In 2008, a couple of years after his wife died, I coaxed Dad up to Billings, where I live. He bought a condominium upstairs from mine. We make up for the time we’ve missed with board games, errand-running around town and the occasional trip to some outpost of his past, where he makes peace with his memories and I fill in a little more of the picture.

The story of us and our people is wrapped up in Western lives, ones that are many years gone and ones that, God willing, have many years left. The sketches of these lives could be drawn almost anywhere, but it’s the fine details of place and time that give them light and flavor.

Nowadays, the homes Dad and I live in are identical in structure and layout, with the walls set at the same angles. The differences lie in how they’re furnished and who lives in them. My floors are filled with modern furniture, and impressionistic art adorns the vibrantly painted walls. I approach life by plumbing emotions and trying to draw out their deeper meanings. Dad’s walls wallow in muted color, holding plaster birds and old pictures of cowboys, and he keeps a tight lid on his thoughts.

Like our houses, we’re the same but different, he and I. Our West, finally, is a place where we watch the sun set from the same vantage point, realizing another day together, with the promise of more coming over the horizon.