leaving hoback junction

by m. christian rossman

When the first red sunlight of the dawn crawled up over his window sill, silently slid down into the dim apartment, and up onto his makeshift table, Keith set down the book at which he had been looking for several hours. He had not slept that night, nor had he done so the previous two nights. Keith's sleep deprivation was making it difficult for him to discern what was real and what he was imagining or, rather, hallucinating. At least that's what was written in the police report.

Keith had been living a solitary and isolated existence since moving to the mountainous and sparsely populated region of Hoback Junction, a largely unknown area deep within the Gros Ventre wilderness in Northwest Wyoming. It was named for the surreal convergence of two long highways and two rivers, the Snake and the Hoback, the latter of which was named by a fur trapper, John Hoback, who, like Keith, abandoned the comforts of home at a young age to explore the wilderness.

In any event, the nominative roots of the region in which Keith lived are not particularly relevant to this brief narrative of events or what was to take place in the coming hours, which, like the transpiration of most things, is entirely unknown and, at best, only partially predictable before it unfolds. Then, after whatever was scheduled to transpire actually occurs, that history tends to be even less interpretable than it was predictable.

On this particular Sunday morning, Keith was obliged only to himself. He finally had a day off from work, and he intended to make the most of it. He had labored long and hard through the summer and autumn so that he would have enough money to elude employment

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through the winter, when he planned to spend his time adventuring and exploring the backcountry in and around Hoback Junction. Like a squirrel gathering his nuts during the season of plenty, all summer long Keith worked the local ranches for cash, hoarding it in coffee cans for the coming snows. Having saved his quota – enough *nuts* to carry him through the winter – he was slowly weaning himself off of the rancher for whom he was presently working, taking Sundays to himself.

As he set his book down, he thought of what he would be doing were he back at home, with his family in Michigan. His parents and his sister would be getting ready for the early Mass, which he would be skipping, again. He preferred to sleep then. From his bed, he would hear the sound of the hairdryer. A spoon clanking against a cereal bowl. The strong chemically smell of hairspray. Buttons and snaps clanking as they tumbled around in the dryer. Rushed footsteps. His dad waiting for them at the car, smoking a cigarette, the pungent scent floating up through Keith's bedroom window. Then, the door closing, and silence. Pure silence and Keith alone in his bed staring uneasily at the ceiling, because he skipped the service again and nobody even bothered to try and wake him up. It was on one such morning he packed up his car and a few weeks later pulled into Hoback Junction.

The sun was getting brighter, and Keith had to get moving. He made some coffee and doubled checked that he had everything he needed for the day in his back pack. He had packed it the night before, but he was having trouble remembering what he put in it. He emptied the pack and took a full inventory.

The line of sunlight was now moving across his apartment wall and had changed from the morning red that reveals only a few things

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in the darkness to the brighter illumination of the day which leaves little to the imagination. Keith worked hurriedly on the contents of his pack, but took a few moments when he got to his map to calculate the time it would take to achieve his destination and return home.

Keith had planned to drive several hours north up the highway out of Hoback Junction, through Jackson, and into the John D. Rockefeller Memorial Parkway, where he would leave his red car in a parking lot behind a tourist lodge and hike a few miles into a secluded hot spring he had discovered the previous winter. So surreal was his memory of this place, which he had visited alone, that he was more than a bit concerned it did not exist at all and was but a dream.

As he remembered it, the spring was deep in the forest, far from the narrow ribbon of highway where the majority of park-goers and tourists strolled, had their picnics, and fed the animals as if the park were some kind of petting zoo.

It was a sulfur hot spring, comfortably nestled within the elbow of an old slow moving river, where in the late evening large owls congregated in the surrounding pine trees whose branches, warmed by the heat of the spring, never held the snow and were reflected, distortedly, in the eddies of the river.

The sensory experience of naked immersion in this place, and in particular the sulfur pool, is what drew Keith in. It was very much like stepping into a dream – the convergence of the conscious and the subconscious like two highways in the wilderness. The soft natural aroma of minerals permeating the air, the texture of the water strangely smooth against the naked skin. Like touching a snake – there being a surprising disconnect between the wet sight of the thing and the dry touch. The vapors rising up within the cooler air, slow dancing, unchoreographed, like a thurible's smoke wafting prayers up to heaven

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– up from a deep place within the Earth into the atmosphere of our realm, carrying with it messages only spontaneously decipherable, like a vision in our periphery, which, when we turn to look more closely, disappears. Fleeting, like a thought we cannot express, dissipating as it travels through the tunnels from mind to mouth.

And the owls, commencing their nightly hunt in this ancient place. The owls, as they hearken and embrace an imminent darkness which envelopes whatever insignificant body becomes immersed in their sulfur pool, with their eyes, separate the spirit from its physical confine, as the pool subsumes both into the womb of these primitive elements, reflecting the stars, and, sometimes, the moon.

If Keith moved along with some haste, he would have plenty of time to drive to the lodge where he would park his car, hike into the thick of the forest, spend the day immersed in the pool, hike out, and return home around midnight. He would not need much sleep before the rancher wanted him to arrive Monday morning at precisely 4:20, as his time in the spring would provide more rejuvenation than a good night's sleep could afford.

Whether he returned in time for sleep was irrelevant, as Keith enjoyed, and in fact toyed, with the sensations spawned by lack of sleep. He believed that sleep deprivation enhanced his powers of observation, this being the result of chemicals within the brain that were only released during periods of fatigue to create heightened awareness when the body's strength was depleted due to lack of sleep. The consequent condition in the brain thus allowed for greater intuitive perception into potential threats, and, in turn, a more powerful intuition into whether fight or flight would be the appropriate response, allowing one to conserve energy in the event that neither was not absolutely necessary. He reasoned that, by releasing these chemicals

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into his brain and his blood-flow, and then not having to process the fight or flight dilemma, he was free to employ the condition in more imaginative and enjoyable endeavors, as if it were some kind of natural narcotic.

When Keith explained this idea to one of the ranch-hands who had commented at how tired he appeared, he just looked at Keith blankly and went back to work.

Applying his theory over the previous several weeks, he had averaged very few hours of sleep per night. Some nights not sleeping at all.

At some point around 8:30, he finished fumbling around with the contents of his pack and drank his last cup of coffee. Upon satisfying himself that he had all the necessary items for a day in the wilderness, and his notebooks and pens, he buckled it shut and stepped out into the sun. He would not return.

When his apartment was searched later that afternoon, the book that he had been fighting through the night before - Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner - was turned over at page three. There were dozens of unfinished letters scattered around on the floor - to his parents, his sister, and even to his grandfather, who had died years earlier.

Once outside his front door, he leaned against the wall and removed a bent up cigarette from the crumpled, red Marlboro pack in his top shirt pocket. He struggled to fix the flame of the lighter upon the tip of the cigarette, and then inhaled deeply and scanned the steep butte, which rose suddenly beyond the far end of the property on which his lonely one-roomed cabin sat. In this morning hour, when the sun first crested the butte, he would often see the small herd of

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big horn sheep who lived on the hill traversing the rocky outcrops and crags, munching on grasses and bushes. He liked watching them. He considered them friends.

When he first moved to Hoback Junction, he had climbed up onto the butte to get a closer look at the sheep and to take some pictures to send home to his sister who always loved nature. When he had told the ranch-hands about this experience running around upon the butte, they chastised him, explaining that it was illegal and the buttes were off limits. They reasoned that if humans trespassed upon the butte, the sheep would abandon it for years for fear of being hunted. One could even be ticketed for doing so. He never again climbed the butte, and from that point forward settled for watching from afar with a cigarette in his mouth. Notably, the sheep did not abandon the butte after he had tread upon it, and he thought it was a stupid law, as he thought of most laws.

Today, however, he did not see the sheep. Instead, he saw vultures. Hovering around, landing, hopping, throwing their heads back as they picked the meat off of some poor creature's bones. A feeding frenzy. Keith hoped these carrion were not feasting on one of his sheep. He could not watch, and he did not want to know. He turned away from the butte and walked over to his car, trying hard to not look back at the vultures on the steep rising hill.

* * *

Not more than a few minutes down the highway, where it rounded the back side of the butte, there was a man standing on the side of the road, waving somewhat frantically, with a bag at his feet. As Keith drew nearer to the man, he came into focus, and he slowed down to consider picking him up. He appeared to be one of the drifters who regularly made their way through town, usually escaping old lives but

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not really searching for new ones. Drifting as they say. Unshaven, but not quite a beard, tattered jeans, work coat, rough boots, long thin hair. The uniform of a man ready to either work or just pass through town.

Tall and skinny, with a head that looked more like a skull than a face, more bone than flesh, the hard jaw and cheeks jutting against the inside of his skin. His dark eyes fixed deep within their sockets, and the forehead running high. His thin hair was pulled tightly back into a pony tail emphasizing the peak of his receding hairline.

Where Keith was raised, in a suburb just outside of Detroit, it would have been very much out of the ordinary to do anything other than ignore this man, or perhaps even call the police if he was standing outside your house. But out here, on this strip of road, at this junction of the world in the midst of a mountain range, it was far from unusual that such a man as this, a disheveled stranger, would be standing at the side of the road gesturing drivers to stop their cars, let him in, and move him on up the road.

Keith turned down the music, slowed the car, and veered over onto the gravel shoulder engulfing the man in a cloud of dust. The man walked at a brisk, awkward pace toward the red car. He was limping. Keith reached to unlock the back door.

"Hey, hop in," he hollered out the open window.

The man opened the door and threw a large duffle bag into the back seat. It was a worn out green canvas bag, which was just like an old bag that Keith's father had borrowed from a friend who flew helicopters in the Viet Nam war. His dad never gave it back. Keith always wondered why his dad failed to return that relic to its owner,

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who, in truth, was probably perfectly happy to rid himself of such baggage.

The man slammed the back door, opened the front door, and before he even got in, the stench of stale cigarette smoke, liquor, and a very strong metallic odor preceded him.

Keith immediately regretted his decision to stop and thought of pulling away – but he had his bag in the back seat and the man was climbing in the car.

"Thanks for stopp'in."

"No problem, where you 'goin?"

"Wherever the hell you're 'goin, I don't care, get the hell 'outa this shithole, take me as far away as you can," he said as he motioned to the back seat, "I see you got a full pack in the back, you 'goin on up hik'in in the park or some shit?" he asked, and then laughed, like they were sharing some kind of joke known only to them.

Before Keith could answer, the man's nervous laughing intensified. It was a crazy sort of laugh. Not quite sinister, but definitely not what one might describe as a happy fun-loving laugh.

What the hell is he laughing at? What the goddamned hell is he laughing at?

Keith did not speak.

"Man, however far up the road you're 'goin, that'll be just fine by me, I don't care, just get me out of this shithole, I won't be no bother to you, you're just a kid, what the hell you do'in out here? You live out here all alone, or you got an old lady or something? Ain't nobody needs an old lady, I'll tell you that much, goddammit, I'll tell you that."

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"Yeah, I live back down the road, off the creek by the bridge, it's pretty nice down there, I moved there a while back and work over in," Keith stopped talking midsentence.

I told him where I live. Why did I do that?

"Right down at the bottom of the butte there? That butte where you picked me up? That's where you live?" The man sounded concerned. Paranoid even.

"Yeah, I'm the only one there, I like it. It's really nice, can fish right out my back door, in Cache Creek," Keith said.

Can't I just shut up, why am I telling him anything? I have to get rid of this man.

"You didn't see noth'in there this morning didja?"

"Like what? Na, I didn't even see the sheep that usually wander around up there."

"Nothing, huh?" The man asked skeptically. "Betcha it's real nice down there. I bet. Never been up on that damn butte there, I was just walk'in by, so I wouldn't know, anyway. But yeah, I see sheep 'an shit wander'in round up there. You know what, though, I'm a city man, I can't stand this woodsy mountain bullshit, ain't noth'in 'gainst it, if you like it, but ain't nuth'in to do, not the kinda action I like. I can't take it no more. The work sucks. My boss sucked. Said I was steal'in from him, I don't know what the hell he was talkin' 'bout."

The man put his head into his hand and rubbed it hard, and then went into a rant about how his boss did him wrong. He should have given his boss a beating for what he said about him. Then he moved onto other subjects, like the government and taxes, land use and mineral rights, some fortune he didn't make, and then ranting for about

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a half hour about his "old lady and her step kid." He sure didn't like them.

Keith watched the man out of the corner of his eye as he drove. The muscles in his neck twitched. At one point, the man turned the rearview mirror toward him so that *he* could see behind the car from his position in the passenger seat.

Keith casually reached down to his left side to feel whether his hunting knife was in the door pocket, where he usually kept it because it was uncomfortable on his belt while he drove. It was the knife his dad had given him before he left home. Unfortunately, though, the knife was not there. Maybe it was in the day pack. In his sleep deprived state, he could not remember.

The man kept on talking.

Will this man ever shut the fuck up?

His voice just motored on, and on, droning, like the engine of the car. This and that. That and this. Whatever came into this man's mind spewed forth, murdering the silence that would have allowed Keith to gather his senses and comprehend his next steps. The man's voice and his stench were like a nightmare incarnate.

"You got an old lady? Naah you don't, what am I think'in? You're just a kid, how old are you anyway?"

"Almost twenty."

"Damn!" He exclaimed, "You don't know shit," the man said as he frantically looked in the rearview mirror over and over, like he was scared someone was following him.

"Lemme tell you something, you want to know something?"

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No.

"You don't want no old lady. Never take one. I mean it, believe me, I know, they ain't noth'in but problems. Nag nag nag nag nag. And guess what?"

Keith looked off into the distance and said nothing.

"You know what?"

"No, what?"

"You know who she care about? Nobody. Not me. Nobody but her. I'm tell'in you, you know what I'm say'in?"

"Yeah."

The man settled back in his seat.

"Look, I'm not going that much further up the road, so how about I drop you off?"

"Yeah, I was a damn fool. That shit's on me, for moving in with her and that brat of hers. I shoulda known. That boy. He was 'bout your age. That boy, though. He wasn't like you, he never listened. You know how it is? You know what I'm say'in?"

"Sure, yeah," replied Keith.

The feeling of imminent, unavoidable harm poured into him, like one of those dreams that compelled him to avoid sleep. He could not make it stop. He was running. His legs were pumping hard. But he was not going anywhere. Something was coming. It was in motion, and he had little control over it. The harder he pushed and pulled his legs, the slower he moved. He could not see what was behind him. It was shrouded in darkness. But it was coming. He knew that much.

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"So, where the hell you 'goin, Keith?"

"Not far now, how'd you know my name?"

The man laughed. "I saw it on your pack," pausing, then spelling it out, "K-E-I-T-H, Keith, you know I can read, Keith, you think I'm a dumb ass, you think I'm a retard?"

He knows my name.

"No, come on man, I didn't think you couldn't read."

"I'm just fuck'in with you. Lighten up. Chill out. Redder, Steve, Steve Redder."

"What?"

"That's my name, you know, my real name. But, a lot of people call me Marlboro."

"Why?"

"Cause I smoke 'em, and the pack's red, you know, Marlboro Reds, like my name. That's what they call 'em and that's kinda what they call me, sometimes. Started out Redman, and at work one time some dude on a cigarette break called me Marlboro Redder, and it got shortened to Marlboro, you know what I'm say'in? I don't give a fuck what nobody calls me."

"Yeah, okay."

"You didn't think that was on my birth certificate did you," he said, laughing.

"No, I didn't think that."

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"Speak'in of which, Keith, why don't you gimme one of them you got there in your pocket," Steve exclaimed and laughed as he leaned over and took the cigarette pack out of Keith's shirt pocket and helped himself.

Keith did not laugh. They had been on the road for about an hour, he was at least another hour from his destination, and now he had this drifter reaching into his pocket and taking his cigarettes.

Steve removed a cigarette from the pack and placed it between his dried out lips. As Steve lit the cigarette, Keith noticed, for the first time, that his right hand was wrapped tightly in a bloody bandage.

Why is he bleeding?

Keith fired up his last cigarette for himself.

"What did you do to your hand?" Keith asked.

"Noth'in really. You know how it is? Things get a little crazy. Old lady came at me with a knife. You know what I'm say'in?"

I'd like to come at you with a knife, but I don't have one. Keith laughed out loud.

"You think that's funny?" Steve said, with irritation. "She came at me with a knife! Things get crazy sometimes, you know how it is?"

"Yeah, sure, I know how it is. So you thought you'd get out of town?"

"Wouldn't you? Hell yeah, I get out of town. She'd turn that shit on me. And guess who goes down? 'Ole Steve, Steve Redder. Been down that road before, and ain't goin' down it again, you know what I'm say'in?"

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"So what'd you do?"

Steve looked out the window silently for at least a minute.

"Got crazy? That's what happened. Real crazy. My old lady and her boy, that boy, that boy he never got no discipline, he just do whatever he want, not like when I was a kid, you know what I'm say'in, not like you, Keith. You get it. You wouldn'ta liked that little son of a bitch if you knew him, you know what I'm say'in, and I mean that."

"Yeah, right," Keith mumbled.

"So I come home from work, yeah, bust my ass all day, mak'in honest pay and all that shit, I gotta deal with my boss, 'goin at me 'bout missing tools, and, man, I don't know what the hell else. I don't even listen to him no more. That guy, I don't know what the hell he's talk'in about, and he's go'in after me, so I'm say, 'I'm outa here,' I'm done with all this shit, and I went home.

"So I went home early. She wasn't expecting my ass back in that house for 4 more hours, and you don't wanna know what I found goin' on in there. My house. My house, you know what I'm say'in?"

You're right, I don't want to know. Because if I knew, you'd probably have to kill me.

Steve checked the rear view mirror again. The sun was rising well above the mountain range now, and the road was climbing and falling with the changing elevations. The windows were down. Traffic on the road was starting to thicken, and the tourists travelling into the park, which Keith usually felt disrupted his solitude, now gave him a sense of comfort.

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"Bro, let me put it to you this way, what I saw goin' on there I can't even tell you." Steve punched the dashboard. Hard enough to loosen a couple of the tape cassettes that were wedged in its crevices.

"Sorry," Steve said, as he picked up the tapes off the floor and put them back. "Lookey here, Pink Floyd, you listen to that shit? Shit trips me out."

"Uh, yeah, I kinda like it."

"I ain't down with that crazy shit, country is what I like, you know Alan Jackson and shit? Love that shit. Mercury Blues, Chas'in a Neon Rainbow, you like that shit?"

"Yeah, sure."

Steve started whistling some country tunes, presumably by Alan Jackson.

Keith saw a sign for a picnic area ahead a few hundred yards and started to slow down. The white outline of a picnic table on a brown sign.

"All right, hey, okay, this is where I'm stopping, now."

"Where? You hav'in a picnic or some shit?"

"Up here at this area, yeah, right up here."

"Up ahead, it's a picnic area that I always go to. I like it. It's pretty cool."

"Really? This place?" Steve skeptically questioned as Keith turned onto a dirt road. "Why the hell would you want to drive all the way up here to come to this place?"

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"Yeah, it's a pretty nice place just to chill out and listen to music?"

"And get high?" Steve asked.

"Sure, if you want to get high, it would be a pretty good place to do that."

"You got any?" Steve asked.

"No, I don't. Do you?"

"No, that boy, my old lady's boy smoked it all."

"Alright, well if I drop you off here, you'll be able to find someone to take you further on. But this is far as I'm going."

Keith had never been here before, and he had no idea what would present itself as he drove down the road. He had expected that being a picnic area it would be very close to the main road, and perhaps even populated enough that Steve would be deterred from doing to Keith whatever he might be inclined to do if nobody was around. But the road kept going and going, seemingly for miles, winding through trees and over rough-hewn bridges.

"Hey, man, you know you can't drop me off way back in here? What the hell? It's the middle of nowhere, you know what I'm say'in? There ain't nobody around. If you wanna chill back here, that's cool, but you're going to have to drive me back out."

"Okay, you want me to drive you back now, I can just drop you off at the road," Keith replied.

"Nah, that's cool, I'll see what's back here. I ain't got nowhere to go."

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The road came to an end, and there was a small open area where Keith stopped the car, turned it off, and pulled up the parking brake. He left the keys in the ignition.

They both got out of the car. Steve stretched and let out a groan. Keith looked around. There was nobody else there. Alone with this man in the woods feeling further from home than ever before.

"Okay, Steve, I'm going to go take a piss."

"Yeah, sure, man, what the hell we gonna do here?" He asked as he followed Keith, who was walking into the trees.

"Can I have a little privacy?"

"Sure. No problem man, I get it. Privacy."

Steve wandered over to the edge of the lake, which was about a football field's length from the car. Keith was about half that distance from the car. Steve kept looking back at Keith. Keith did the same to Steve.

Keith then turned and ran toward the car with as much speed as his legs had in them, though it felt as he were not moving at all. Like that dream. Steve started running too.

Keith was much closer to the car than Steve and would have easily beat him to it, except that he fell, which put them on an equal pace to reach the car. When he was on the ground he picked up a rock and continued running with it.

They got to the car at the same time, and as Keith put his hand on the car door, Steve clasped onto his hand and ripped it off the handle.

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Instinctively, Keith swung at Steve's boney face with the rock, landing it squarely on the cheek bone. Blood exploded from his face. Steve stumbled around and fell to the ground behind the car, holding his head and spewing out expletives.

The birds continued chirping, and Keith could hear the small waves lapping up out of the lake against the shore.

Keith got into the car, turned the ignition, jammed the stick shift into reverse, grinding the gears, and pressed the gas. The car hit something, but Keith saw nothing when he looked at the mirror, which was still turned toward the passenger seat. He felt the car wheel rise up over a bump, which was not there when he pulled in. Keith did not want to know what it was.

After all, it was just a dream. When nobody else knows, it is a dream.

Just before he got to the main road, Keith stopped and threw Steve's bag out the door into the trees. Then, he pulled out onto the road, and went back the way he came.

* * *

As he neared the butte by his cabin, he saw a great deal of movement on it. Several people were walking on it. This was not right. You're not allowed on the butte. There is a law against it.

As he pulled closer, he saw several ambulances, police cars, and a long white van parked up next to the butte. Men in uniform were taking pictures, writing notes, and conversing. They were walking on the butte.

As Keith drove by, he was waved down by a police officer. Keith pulled the car up to the police officer and stopped.

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“You live around here?” the police officer asked.

“Kind of.”

“You know a man by the name of Steve Redder?”

“No.”

“You seen anything strange today?”

“Vultures.”

Finis

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