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## Leaving the Ranch

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## **Leaving the Ranch**

Early in the 1960s, in solemn conclave, my family voted to sell our ranch in Warner Valley, in the far outback of southeastern Oregon. Getting the job done took six or seven years.

Ours was what is called a third generation family, shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves. The old man, it was said, talking about my grandfather, he got his name on that property, it's the best ranching property in the West, and now them grandkids will piss it away. Count on it.

The folk-talk was accurate, not that it took any genius to foresee the future. Most of us wanted out, for simple reasons, having to do with money.

What we owned, in our family, was not really land, but shares in what was called the Warner Valley Livestock Company. I think the story might have come out differently if each of us had owned some land, individually, some acres we could walk on, and dig holes in. We might have felt ourselves connected to living things like the pretty ring-necked Manchurian pheasants nesting down next to the quicksand slough, we might have been attached to one little piece of place in our imaginations. We might have talked about our place, such talk being a powerful aphrodisiac and way of holding people to the soil.

But we did not own any actual land, we owned shares, and our company did not, as a matter of policy, pay dividends. All profits went back into the property. Which was a pretty good deal if you were a majority stockholder with tax problems. But not so hot for minority stockholders who might want to invest their own money. Or piss it away on racehorses or trips to Tibet.

What the Warner Valley Livestock Company paid was salaries. If you worked for the company, you got a salary; if not, you didn't get, as they say, shit. So it came to be that some family members, who were unlikely to ever be employed in the ranching business, thought they would rather have their money invested in a string of shoe stores or Dairy Queens, or just spend it on frivolities if they damned well pleased.

At family gatherings such desires were called cheap and common and foolish. Since I was one of the few getting a salary, it took me a long time to realize I was one of the heretics; I wanted out.

People ask me if I don't sometimes really wish I was back on the ranch. Yeah, I say, I got a deep yearning to pitch hay. The answer is always no. I have this life which is mine, I made it up, the whole story. That other life, in such serious ways, belonged to somebody else, somebody's son or grandson. I was lucky to get out.

My urge toward another life started at the end of childhood, with early marriage. What we thought we were going to do, my wife and I, both of us nineteen in our beginning, was get everything right and never make any mistakes, so long as we lived. I remember the ways we were going to be generous. And the ways we failed, and found reasons to ignore the possibility of absolutely giving ourselves away. I wish I could say it was because we didn't try. But it wasn't anything so simple.

We tried hard at being good to each other, and we thought that meant we were being good to the world, and it seemed to be working for a long time. We thought ours was the special case; our connection would never fail. Now we have been divorced for

twenty-five years. What did we ask of each other that was too much; how did our inabilities manifest themselves?

Maybe we were too careful, and tried to be too good.

In December of 1951, when we were nineteen, Janet and I were quite formally married, after religious instruction. She wore a long white dress, and I a white college boy dinner jacket. The ceremony took place in a fine hardwood Presbyterian church; we spent our first night in the Eugene Hotel, and the next day we visited the Sea Lion Caves. We were children, really strangers, but we were decent children, and we tried to accommodate each other.

Here it began; she worked Christmas vacation checking groceries for Safeway; I lay on the couch in our student's apartment and read Henry Steele Commager's two-volume *History of the United States* from cover to cover. This was all strange ground, I was a married man, I was supposed to be looking for work, but I had never read a book like that, never before, so many pages and so serious and filled with things I didn't know. I started making lists of Civil War battles; I couldn't stop.

That was a first experience with my own ignorance, my first recognition that my education had been appalling. I knew nothing of the world; I really didn't know much about ranching, and nothing about the farming in which my father had made his reputation. From my first quarter at Oregon State there were professors of agriculture who would lecture the class about my father's avant-garde irrigation practices, and turn to me for answers to their questions. I didn't know what they were talking about.

And now I could not stop my reading; this was an end to such ignorance. I was a married man, I should have a job, I felt some

guilt but I went on reading anyway, and there began one of the retreats of my life, which I have to respect, I think, as a move, however neurotic, toward salvation.

As illiterate boys will, I came to books, and learned to value ideas beyond anything actual that might be happening right at the time. I reread *Moby Dick* and *Walden* and the Cornford translation of *The Republic* three times each during my senior year at Oregon State. It was as if I thought they had to be memorized, and perhaps I did. The books piled up around my life like barricades; I turned away from my friends and their athletics, and became the worst sort of schoolboy pedant.

Those couple of years were like time out from real life. My wife gave up her college and checked groceries, I took money from my parents and worked at odd jobs for the agricultural research agencies connected to Oregon State, counting beets in a row, things like that.

But books were my obsession and sickness. I had discovered a separate kingdom where nobody lived but me, a place made of ideas.

It is the place where I still do my living much of the time, yet it is not a real place, as we know. For a long while it was only a place to go, a hideout; it was the best trick of my life to turn what I did there into work, and a justifiable profession.

The idea of writing was another thing, something I came to about that same time, beyond reading. Maybe all of it started with my incapacities and my failures at what were thought of as manish things in my part of creation. Maybe I wanted a world in which I was the one who made it up.

Maybe it was power I was after. That would be easy and clever to say. Or we could blame it on poor lost Hemingway. I first

sensed storytelling as a useful thing to do while reading Hemingway. Which, in light of Hemingway's misadventures, makes my conjecture about power and masculine failures sound more accurate.

The door to all this had first been eased open for me through the efforts of a teacher my junior year in Klamath Union High School. That sainted man (I cannot recall his name) drove a crowd of us schoolboy semi-jocks to memorize some James Whitcomb Riley and some Emerson and some Whitman, and he tricked us, he got some of us to like it. I came away thinking poetry was one of the things I liked.

So I was happy, the beginning of my freshman year at Oregon State, when I got signed up for Intro to Literature. But the first thing we encountered was Eudora Welty's "The Death of a Traveling Salesman." Another defeat. Grown-up reading was incomprehensible.

At first it seems hard to figure out why I was so baffled by a story that these days seems direct and powerful. The story says:

Bowman could not speak. He was shocked with knowing what was really in this house. A marriage, a fruitful marriage. That simple thing. Anyone could have had that.

So maybe my bafflement is not quite unaccountable. It is possible, given my family, there in the seventeen-year-old beginnings of my freshman year, that I did not really understand anything about the idea of a fruitful marriage. It is possible I did not know what the story was about.

So it is easy to imagine my surprise, a couple of years later, when my wife's father pressed me to read Hemingway, and I

relented and found myself with a writer who spoke to me of what I understood to be actualities and recognizable urgencies, like the chance of dying in a pointless war (for me, the chilling and real possibility of going to Korea).

Hemingway moved me to want to be like him, and say things of fundamental consequence. If you did that you would not ever have to think you had wasted your life.

I tried to write some stories. Everybody in them was doomed. I took a creative writing class from Bernard Malamud, and found that Eastern intellectuals were a breed of human being I had never imagined. Malamud met with us in a little room in a Quonset hut, and he was happy, I think. He had just published *The Natural*, and officials at Oregon State thought the creative writing class was a kind of reward. I suppose it was. Malamud had been teaching nothing but Freshman Composition.

Right off he encouraged me to write something that reeked even slightly of the actual world. What I did was frown my serious frown, and write up some rancher anecdotes I could claim as precious and indeed just like life.

Malamud tried to tell me about recognitions and the fact that my little narratives would not be stories until some one thing changed, until the consequences of some moral stance were played out. He told me there had to be a formal moment of recognition, in which somebody came to see the world in a new way. That was how stories worked, he said, and what stories were about, learning to see freshly.

But I understood that I already saw some true things about the place where I had always lived. Another true thing I thought I saw was Malamud, in his outlander way, trying to pervert my clear, heartbroken, Warner Valley understandings.

I would have none of his nonsense, and wrote more of my anecdotes. Malamud gave me a series of flunks, red F after red F, until I relented. With some contempt for both of us I wrote an undergraduate college story with a rising action and a recognition—all the phony works. He gave me a red A.

What a pain in the ass I must have been. How that poor man must have shook his head over my arrogance. But he hooked me, he and Mister Hemingway. I was going to be a writer; that was it for me. The man who persuaded me to take books seriously in an academic way was Herbert Childs, an English teacher at Oregon State. I came to respect his intelligence in the same blind way I allowed my father his authority. He nearly wept in the classroom when Stevenson was defeated, and it was unseemly to a boy from eastern Oregon, unmanly; I looked away.

“The last good man who will ever run for President,” Childs said, (and maybe he was right). But I agreed with Herbert Childs right down the line, I was prime in my readiness to abandon the politics of my family.

And then, at the age of twenty-one, in January of 1954, I found myself graduated in General Agriculture. It is hard to imagine a more useless degree unless you have it in mind to spend your life as a county agent deep in the Willamette Valley of Oregon.

People were dying in Korea, and Janet had got herself pregnant (that was how I thought about it, as something women did, not something men did to women, or women did to men, but something women did for their own mysterious reasons). So I had no choice, I would enlist in the Air Force where I was unlikely ever to see combat. We had put off our lives, and we could do it again. That was the thinking.



By early summer, 1954, we were living on the second floor of an old house just south across 17th Street from the City Park in Denver. In heat of afternoon we would move out onto a screened-in porch, high up like we were in a secret tree house with the leaves around us, and the nesting birds.

My daughter was an infant, and she was a miracle. So long as you have this, I would think, meaning her, you have enough, everything. My wife and I loved one another, it was clear.

Huge electric storms would form over the Rockies in the late afternoon. The light would turn yellow-green as those storms came sweeping down to us, bearing drumming rain and shattering bursts of hailstones.

It is a time I like to resolve into memories of tranquillity, even though I know the actual days were mostly formed around bewilderment—who were we, who should we want to be? It was the first time either my wife or I had ever lived in a city, or on our own, and we were half a continent from home.

As an Airman 3rd Class, stationed at Lowry Air Force Base, I was going to school from six o'clock in the evening to midnight, training to be what was called a Photo Interpreter, learning to study aerial photographs, and assess signs of damage from conventional (non-nuclear) high-altitude bombardment. A couple of years later, in the Strategic Air Command, at Travis and on Guam, I got closer to what I thought of as the real stuff, high-tech radar bomb-sight scoring, and huge glossies of the aftermath from nuclear explosions over doomed Pacific atolls.

It was as if we were still in school and only had to make it to the next check from home, all of our life an enormous distance from anything that could be considered actual.

I cannot speak for the woman who was my wife; she lives far away in her own privacies. But in this latter day I find sad pleasure in recalling the summery stillness of Denver, and recall watching her push the stroller across through the traffic on 17th Street, so she and my daughter could circle through the ducks around the edge of the pond in City Park before the storms. I don't recall going with them at all.

It's clear we all lose much of what would have been ours because of inattention while we invent the future. But I have to resist telling myself that I can see that young woman and her little girl so much better in my imagination these thirty some years after the fact than I could when they were real and I was deep in the young man's disease of looking beyond the moment.

Such a notion is mostly hindsight nonsense, and it is insulting to the people we were. A friend of mine said that the first summer he was in love exists in his memory like a church he can go visit. Those years are like that for me; we were in love, at least we trusted each other in a blind-eyed way I will never again give to another adult. We were going to be together forever unto death and beyond.

It was my plan to spend my years in the the Air Force pursuing my secret life, reading the important books of the world and getting ready to become a writer, which was my one vision of purpose. But when I actually seated myself before the typewriter my wife had brought to our marriage, a boy from ranching with a degree in General Agriculture from Oregon State College, the writing was as unreal as the Air Force.

So I gave it up. There was plenty of time. I was a young man, I would do my time in the Air Force, then go home to Warner Valley. I would read all the books, then I would know what to say.

But I didn't read anything that summer in Denver; I found solace for my anxieties in going back to boyhood, mostly focused on building intricate model airplanes from balsa wood, breathing the fumes of strange glues while I waited for mysteries to dissolve, and new insights to form. But those recognitions never showed themselves, and my model airplanes were ungainly and erratic in flight. Like a sulking child I would light another failure afire and send it sailing out from our second-story porch, down in flames.

The day after Thanksgiving in 1964, at the age of thirty-two, hung over and mournful, I set up my wife's old black typewriter, and got started trying to write. This is the first page (all that I saved) of the the first story I tried. It was called "Sorrow In L.A. County."

The day after the day after the day after.

Jerry Benidict was a thin and handsome young man, married seven years to the same girl and in his secret heart an altogether special person. Nothing seemed to register for the first long seconds except that today was the day after something. His head was going to burst like a pain bomb. (Long seconds at first seemed to register nothing except anxiety about who he was and what). Then he rolled over on the bed and knew something had happened to the Jerry Benidict who lived in a division house in the Thousand Oaks district. A house that shown like pink spangled coral in the great yellow California sun, that same sun that was slanting into his eyes through the dirty Venetian blinds in this furnace of a dingy, crappy, cheap noontime motel room. Great Jesus suffering Christ where in hell

was this? And why in thundering throbbing hell was he here?

Rolling his feet out on the warping linoleum floor Jerry the boy hung his head and knew only one thing, that he was familiarly and wonderfully hung over and that this little room was an air tight oven that he had to get out of because it was the day after the day after Patty the girl bride in the little pink bungalow had lumped his clothes in his suitcases for the third time in the last four years and dismissed him from the presence of herself and her two little girl babies.

He was hung over, really tightened up, and he resented it all because there . . .

There it ends, the beginning I kept as a memento of what it was like to begin as a writer, full of my fixations. I've been writing more than twenty-five years, and I'm still digesting those same disconnections, so powerful in that life, which ended with more finality than I could have guessed in January of 1968, when I began trying to live as someone whose major purpose was stories.

The typing was something I would go at every day with all ambition, like work, that was what I said to myself. It was a task I would never abandon, no matter if it came to nothing.

But I didn't understand what I was attempting in the beginning. I thought it was making sentences and paragraphs, I thought it was fashioning elegance out of what you already knew. I didn't understand that it is mainly chancing to know, and that it has to be done over and over because of the fragility of what is known; the task is always there, something to do, and always worth doing.

The summer twilight had gone luminous; the children were dark figures on the concrete irrigation dam, silhouetted against that light. The water between me and them was curling with places where fish might live. I looked up and saw my children waiting on the irrigation dam while I went on fishing as darkness came down and I didn't even know how much it mattered, that moment, in which that was all I was doing.

They were waiting for me to get done with it and go home and sit at our table and look across the table to my wife and have a drink of whiskey; I can taste the whiskey. How much from that moment, then, when we were back there together, alone, in that instant, my children and me with their mother waiting somewhere, do I remember? How long would it take to name all the little I know, this from a time when I thought I was going crazy and unable to know anything, how many pages and pages, and what would that be; why didn't I pay attention? Who were we?

It is not my business to know what Janet thought; I cannot know. We argued in traditional ways; she was angry, and disgusted, and felt grievously betrayed, I am sure of that. She was also humane; she tried to understand what was wrong with me, she tried to help but she couldn't, I wouldn't let her (it was beyond me to admit that I needed help; that would have been an emotional death).

Janet conducted herself with dignity; she was not at fault. What I most deeply remember from that house where I lived with her is decency; that memory is one of the forces that drives me to this work; it has helped sustain me and still does.

By early in 1967 it became obvious that we were at last going to sell the property in Warner; a new life loomed. So what would it be? By 1967 my time was divided several ways: drinking days,

hung-over days, writing days, and an occasional working day. I was about half the nights on a running hide-away drunk, and half the days I was incapacitated by a running hangover.

We had moved to the north side of Lakeview, for the schools we said, although I am sure there were people connected to the ranch who were justifiably pleased to see me gone off the property most of the time. Officially, my daughter was going to junior high, and it was time we moved to town; it was either move to town or board her out with some family.

Alongside the house we bought there was a little one-room study in a remodeled garage, with a real fireplace where I built smoky fires. Thinking this must be the way writers got it done, in studies like this, I set up my typewriter. Each morning I was supposed to be going out to the ranch and at least making some pretense of working; I seldom went. I told myself I would say I needed to work on my writing, if anybody asked; nobody did.

Writing was my only purpose, that was what I told myself, but I didn't really have any story and I went playing instead; my wife clerked in a drugstore; we looked at houses in Klamath Falls; we thought maybe we would buy one after the ranch was sold. No one knew what we would do when we lived in Klamath Falls, but maybe we would live there; I foresaw a study with white creamy paint and small-paned French windows looking out on a garden and the town below. I was hanging on; my son played Little League; my daughter had a date; we were a family you might see on television; this is almost all I remember from that last bright sweet springtime.

Without a story, I took to inhabiting fantasies, which in very real ways became my story, as they will.

Over the next weeks and months what had been a slowly accumulating intention began to become resolve. On the day after Thanksgiving in 1965, when I was thirty-three years old, I started trying to write stories. Resolved that I would write every day, give it a lifetime of effort whether it worked or not, because success wasn't the point, I would get out of bed every morning before sunup, and type for an hour or so before going off to the ranch. I have learned to understand writing as useful . . . as gestures, passing from one person to another . . .

"Leaving" (1987)

Sounds sweet and legitimate, and it was, except that I have recounted and decided the year I began was 1964, and it was more complex, there was another side to it, there was the woman who called on the telephone every day or so; she read part-time as a fiction editor at a literary magazine; the talk drifted from literature to sex; I called her back. She was, I think, as lost as I was, as crazy, reaching, as we all sometimes do, into sexual adventure, into some detailed and risqué talking, for a purpose. But soon we would both have a story; we would be writers.

In June I went off to help with putting up the hay on the meadows at a place we called the River Ranch, along the Ana River at the north end of Summer Lake, the first serious property my grandfather ever owned (bought in 1911). The hay crew lived in an old motel by the highway, the fault-block uplifting of Winter Rim (named by John C. Fremont in 1847) looming at our backs as we gazed east to the long reaches of an infinite twilight over the alkaline flats.

Every evening I would stand at the telephone in the parking lot and call my literary woman. We talked sex, we got right down; this was the life, I thought, candor, craziness.

The days were hot and long and a delirium of what next. I did not call home. I drank in my room and talked some philosophies, mostly to myself.

Then I went home for the Fourth of July, and found a North American Van Lines truck parked in the street outside the house where I had lived like such a prince of irresponsibility. Men were loading furniture; my wife was leaving me; I was thirty-five years old, my boyhood was finished. I was enormously, foolishly, surprised. And deeply frightened. We can die of our isolations; I thought I was close. My history, I see, could be named *Failures of the Imagination*.

Which is what I thought I was curing on the day after the 4th of July as I hunted up a couple of women, as I rode away drunk into the dying afternoon, as I wept and tried to see beyond my simple-minded, baby-boy sort of terror.

It was important to head my life out in the direction of significance; I thought the weakness in my limbs would pay off in the long run, and I guess it did, in ways, because I stood it, and because I stood it I have at least some idea of what it is to be your own boy even when your bones are melting.

Those were the sorriest of times, heartbroken, the most frightening. There was not a thing to do but carry on; I had made this mess, so I had to see it through. The next time I went back to Lakeview the house had been empty a couple of weeks. There was nothing in the rooms but all my books, and some ash trays. The spaces echoed, it was all mine.

An old friend came to help me box my thousands of books.



"Jesus Christ," he said. "You'd be a smart son of a bitch if you read all of these."

What did he think I was doing with those books if I didn't read them? Who, in my concealments, had I led him to believe I was? I did not know; even my friends did not know me; I was not surprised, it seemed right.

All my people, my mother and my father and my brother and my sister and my wife and my children, were far away in other lives, and I had better get my ass on the road. I loaded those boxes of books in an old horse trailer and hauled them off to storage; I told myself I would be back for them soon.

Every so often I make a run at naming the moment when I came to understand I was someone else and driven (never ready) to hit the road toward a new life. But there was no moment, there was just a long and intricate series of defeats and evasions and intimacies, one and another until I was the next person.

What I did first was pretty much instinctual. I ran from my wreckage, back to haying at the River Ranch, and on to the Klamath Marsh, insinuated myself into the pity of relatives who were really strangers. They were kind to me in an offhand sort of way.

The late summer and fall of 1967 I drove the pumice-dust drunk-man roads through the distances of timbered country along the Williamson River, I ran my haybaler, and I drank in the evening. I began trying to center myself in work.

My brother and I took an old World War II Jeep and went out to patch fences every day. The enormous yellow pines stank of sweet pitch while we leaned against them and ate our lunch and listened to the World Series on a portable radio. We hammered staples while contrails crossed the skies; we were miles from

anyone; the paved road was thirty miles to the west. As winter came at us I tried to relearn the arts of horseback. I rode the frozen swamplands for cattle, and fell into another love.

By December I was still heartbroken by what I thought of as my estrangements even though I was already obsessed with the vivid woman who shared my second marriage. The snow was two feet deep, and when I was not running the roads I was holed up and disoriented in a three-room ranch-hand house on a high bank overlooking the iced-up Williamson River. A half-dozen huge ponderosas sighed in the winter winds, and I listened to country music on my radio, trying to cherish an imaginary future in which this would all be grist for the mill.

One vividly cold Sunday morning my father came driving in sort of grandly for that neck of the deep woods, in a brand new yellow Mercedes, accompanied by the good woman who would be his second wife. They parked out front with the motor running, fog lifting from the tailpipe into the bright ten-below-zero sunlight, and I watched my father get out and come to the house alone, to ask me if I had anything to drink, by which he meant whiskey.

What I had was Jack Daniel's. I poured him a glass, and he asked me what I was going to do with myself. I told him I'd be leaving after the first of the year, when I would go away to college again, to do studies in creative writing, which was not a discipline anybody ever heard of in our part of the world. He looked at me like I was crazy, and sipped at his tumbler of whiskey.

"I spent my life at things I hated," he said. "I sure as hell wouldn't recommend that."

What I think he was telling me, since that was the end of the conversation, had to do with the fact that my father had once

wanted to be a lawyer, and that he had allowed himself to be talked out of that ambition by his father. I think he was trying to remind me that his life of working with his father had in any long sense been a failure. The pretty horses of love and familial trust had long since been led to slaughter.

My father was sixty-eight years old, he had suffered five heart attacks and a stroke, he was marrying again, and he was implying that I should get on with my own opportunities.

That moment of talk heartened me through the years from then to now.

In the early summer of 1968 my second wife delivered a fullterm stillborn baby boy. He strangled on his own umbilical cord.

"The worst thing," she said, "is the quiet. It's out and you can't hear anything but the nurses breathing."

In the late summer of 1968 we drove out east from Denver one morning. I was hung over and heading to graduate school in Iowa City, and I lost my nerve as the Rocky Mountains sank behind us into the expanses of the Nebraska plains. This was not my life, there was nothing out there; I was sick with anomie.

But there was nothing to turn back toward, and we went on. In the late afternoon she took my picture as I stood by the stump of what seemed to have been the only major tree in Lone Tree, Nebraska, and I tried to be happy enough, conjuring at some connection to Wright Morris. It was a purpose.

Many of us live with a sense that something is deeply wrong. Some of us say there has been a fracturing, a fall. We do not understand what we are, or why.

Aristotle talks of "recognitions," moments of insight or understanding in which we see through to coherencies in the world. We constantly seek after such experiences: We are like detectives, trying to find a true story. And we do, we find the sense in things, over and over, incessantly, theory after theory.

We live in stories; what we are is stories. We are formed in the stories we learn to live in as we go on inventing ourselves. Things happen because of what we are (stories).

We figure, we find patterns and invent, the world drifts, our story falls apart, we reinvent our understandings. It is work that will go on all our lives; we are hapless before it. Alone or not, late in the night we listen to our breathing in the darkness and rework our stories, and we do it again in the morning. All day long, before the looking glass of our unique selves, we reinvent reasons for our lives.

Part of us acts, and another part is outside, witnessing the enactment. Part of us is a mirror in which the other part sees itself reflected. It is easy to see that our place is luminous with significances we don't understand. We say we are suffering from a wound, a fall from a place where we imagine the animals lying down with one another, where they are content to be part of one another. We want to think our condition is temporary, part of us is and does; another part watches, and guesses at the meaning of things; we want to believe we can be healed.

But it never happens; we wonder what we mean; we lose track of reasons why one thing is more significant than another; we are fearful and driven to forget our most basic generousities; we anesthetize ourselves with selfishness. We are driven to the rituals of connection we find in music and dancing and food and storytelling and narcotics and and fucking while the rain falls outside;

we are disappointed in the long run. I can hide my dis-ease under booze or hard labor or good works or literature, or any other obsession. But it comes back in the morning.

It is a situation which led me to believe, for a long time, that there was no way to discriminate between things that are valuable and things that are not; I was mistaken. I thought I didn't have any politics. But I did; we did. Through it all we were trying to practice the arts of communiality and compassion, which turn out to be the best arts.