

## Welcome Home

Moving as a kid just feels like the end of the world.

“But where are we going?” I asked in my broken German- German which would only get worse with time to come.

“To Colorado. Boulder, where you were born. You remember Boulder, don’t you?”

Well, I remembered our little backyard and the wooden fence which separated my neighbor’s house from mine. I remembered the inevitable splinters which would catch my inner thighs or palms as we hopped from yard to yard, world to world. Splinters hurt less back then, an inescapable certainty of childhood, so perhaps less painful because of it.

“*Ein bisschen,*” I replied.

Then, a hazier, more dreamlike image of a park made of tunneled rock drifted to the forefront of my mind. Monsters hid within the dark, red slabs cooling my knobby knees and forearms as we searched for them.

Another park with dinosaurs crawling from their graves, bones and skin and teeth erupting from the sand. A rocket ship stood somewhere here, too- or so I thought- a metal frame encasing some memory of an astronaut who had left this world all together.

I wonder if that astronaut missed home too.

“But our forest...” my Peter whimpered.

“There’s a forest there, too. And giant mountains with big rocks,” Mama said, comfortingly.

“*Versprochen?*” I asked.

“We promise.”

A month and a half later we cross the Colorado-Nebraska border.

“Welcome to Colorful Colorado,” Papa says, slowing to pull up our trailer besides the lonely sign.

“Let’s take a picture.”

We tumble out of the Suburban (which is stuffed to the brim with stuff and things) and line up beneath the sign.

I look around. What color? All I see is brown, red, orange, and more brown.

“Where’s the forest?” I ask, skeptically.

“We’re still in the plains. We won’t see the mountains or the trees for a while longer,” Mama responds.

Papa chimes in, “You’ll love it.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

Papa set the self-timer, pressing the button and running to squeeze between Peter and me.

“Smile!”

I curl my tight lips up into something resembling a smile.

We drive through brown grey plains which span so far they melt into the dusty sky. The sky is wider here, a pale blue- so wide it scares me.

I think of the people who rode horseback carrying bow and arrows. People who I had learned about in history- people who I didn't learn about in any class *but* history. They were showcased next to dinosaurs and mammoths in the museums we visited for field trips.

I think of the huts we built back home with broken branches from late spring snowfalls, snowfalls which weighed down maple and oak trees until they snapped, leaving large portions of the Western Mass region without power. How would we build these huts now, with nothing but rocks and dirt and sky?

I look at my little brother, wondering if he, too, is asking himself this. But he is sleeping, a dribble of drool collecting in the corner of his mouth.

When I close my eyes, I see that pale blue sky. This is our sky now too, it seems.

A little over an hour later, my thoughts of boys or girls or chemistry or infinity are suddenly jolted from my mind. Papa had taken a rather sharp left turn at a perpendicular intersection, the trailer's inertia swinging the Suburban a bit out of caliber.

"Frick," I whisper under my breath, startled slightly.

These country highways still unsettle me, even after driving on them for days- a landscape with far too much space boasting geometric shapes on a large scale. I glance over and see Peter was shaken awake.

"We there yet?" he asks.

“No, we’re stopping at this monument. Have either of you two ever learned about the Sand Creek Massacre in school?”

Peter and I are quiet- we weren’t in the mood for a quiz. After a little too long a wait, I said “no.”

“You would think you kids would learn a thing like that in that school of yours.”

“Sorry,” I say, in fact not sorry at all. “It sounds familiar.”

“Everything sounds familiar once you’ve heard it.”

I roll my eyes, hoping he would spare me the lecture that was about to unfold.

But, alas: The Sand Creek Massacre, as told by a white, middle aged, German immigrant.

“Sometime mid-1800s the cowboys and pioneers traveling west killed a hundred, two hundred people who were living here long before they showed up. I believe those killed were Cheyenne or Arapahoe people, and mostly women and children and grandmas and grandpas. It was a one-sided war, with hundreds of Americans shooting down the people living right in these here plains. America has done some awful things, too.”

As he finishes, we pull up to the site. A lonely, modest stone, engraved with “SAND CREEK BATTLE GROUND NOV. 29 & 30, 1864,” stood among grey-brown stony sand, spikey bushes scattered about. Dead, golden flowers decorated the shrubbery.

“This it?” asks Peter.

“I guess so,” says Mama.

“Oh.”

We walk about the area, looking around- although I'm not quite sure what we are looking for. Ghosts, perhaps.

Peter, however, is searching for arrowheads.

“*Schau!* I think I found one!”

“Really? Let me see.” I say.

Peter plops what looks like a loosely-triangle shaped rock into my upturned palm.

“Hmm. Maybe.”

Papa is meandering his way back to us, pausing to take photos of the landscape. The seemingly infinite iterations of identical images which would pop up on the thick laptop's screen flash in front of my eyes. An image downloading in repeat. Perhaps this is the atmospheric scientist in him, searching between photographs for an inconsistency within the turbulent constancy. But wasn't it a scientist who once said that “insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results?”

“Papa, look what I've found!”

“*Und?* What's that?” he asks, rolling it about in his hand.

“An arrowhead!”

A rather cold gust of air pushes against us, the fine hairs on the back of my thighs flattening to my skin. Papa waits for the blowing against our ears to stop, a blowing like Peter always did on the rim of Papa's hefeweizen bottles.

“Let me take a picture.” The lens snaps closed accompanied with a flash.

“I thought I turned that off...” he mumbles to himself. I laugh inwardly- that flash had a mind of its own.

“You can’t take that home, by the way,” I pester Peter, a sudden boredom gripping my hips.

“What do you mean?” he asks, saddened.

“You’re just not supposed to. I learned it in school,” that, being that.

Little tears well up in Peter’s eyes, although clearly unwillingly to him. I roll my eyes and turn back to the Suburban. The sun is getting exceedingly hot and I wish for another gust of wind like earlier.

“Can we go soon?” I ask, getting increasingly frustrated with the heat. The green tin roof of the car would only offer coverage from the sun, not from the heat. The heat we would have to endure, as always, for lack of A.C. That A.C. was *still* broken, although I can’t remember when, or if, it had ever been functional.

“*Einen Moment,*” Mama says, Papa and she hunched over some apparently incredible thing. I sit in the shade of the Suburban, my back against its front wheels. I look out at the nothingness.

So this is the Wild West.

The next day we drive through tired mountains which showcase gnarled pines and spruces. The switch from grasslands to mountains was abrupt, monstrous piles of rock erupting from the seemingly endless plains. I inspect these ancient trees, trees which grow from rocky crevasses

among walls of cold stone. I'm vaguely fascinated with them, perhaps the long driving wearing on my attention.

But these are no forests, not like those back home. No ferns or plushy green moss or tangled vines growing from every which corner. No, this was a hardened forest- a grown-up forest.

We would camp one last night before pulling into the driveway of our new homes, where we would sleep in bags under the ceilings of our new rooms. We had overshot Boulder, driving an addition hour to find ourselves in Estes Park.

By camping, we mean trailer camping.

We pull up into an R.V. campground. Elks stand about the area, completely undisturbed by our rather giant automobile, trailer and all. We inch by a particularly large beast, antlers threatening to poke my eyes out- not so much as a glance from it.

Mama rapidly takes photos, propping her elbow on the frame of the wide-open passenger window.

*"Vorsichtig..."* Papa warns. "They can get aggressive."

After we park, however, Papa takes the camera from Mama and proceeds to get increasingly close to a nearby elk, apparently having completely forgotten his warning to Mama. Peter and I unhitch the trailer and unwind the four supports at each corner of the big metal thing.

Mama starts boiling pasta water in the trailer just as I start to notice how hungry I am. I sulk by her to the fridge, reaching for a cola. I hope my presence is enough of an offer to help, so

I meander around for a minute or two, mostly in the way as Mama starts chopping some garlic. I take her silence as my opportunity to grab my waveboard and Papa's copy of *Catcher in the Rye* which he had lent me to read during the trip. I head towards the road connecting trailer space to trailer space. Peter appears by my side.

"Watcha doin'?" He asks.

"I dunno. Waveboarding."

"Cool! Can I come?"

"You don't have a board. We've only got one."

He's quiet. I sigh.

"I guess you can walk next to me. Just keep up."

I swivel off, holding the book in my left hand and the cola in my right. Peter keeps a weird gate, half walking half running, to stay by my side.

"How's the book?" he asks.

"Pretty good." I say, my eyes perusing the page.

"Wow, you're almost done!"

"Yeah, I'm trying to finish before tomorrow," I respond, impatiently.

As we turn the corner at the end of rows of shiny trailers, we see a kid, my age or so, throwing a lasso.

"Woah!" Peter exclaims. "A lasso!"



I survey the boy. He is wearing a cowboy hat and cowboy boots. I wonder if he is a cowboy.

“Hi!” says Peter, unapologetically walking up towards the kid. I hang back, painfully aware of my sweaty face and greasy hair from the hot drive.

“Howdy!” says the boy, turning towards us.

“Can I try that lasso?” asks Peter.

“Yeah! Sure. Here, let me show you how to do it.” He models the grasp for Peter, exemplifying the slipping of the rope through his index and thumb and along his palm. The loose knot slides down the rope, and the loops gets bigger and bigger as he swings it around his head, arm raised up high. He casts it, aiming for a stick he had probably stuck in the ground for this very purpose- to be lassoed.

Peter then tries, repeating the boy’s actions step for step. He then proceeds to cast the loop much farther than I had expected. Peter turns to me.

“You wanna try?”

“Uhh,” I look at the boy.

He jumps in, “Yeah give it a try!”

I take the rope from Peter. Adjusting my hand to hold the rope limply like I saw the boy do, I square my hips awkwardly. I swing the loop around my head, somewhat surprised by the weight of it. When I feel I’ve built up substantial speed, I release the rope, casting it quite a bit further than the dusty mark Peter’s attempt had left.

A smile breaks out across my face.

“Wow, you’re a natural!” the boy says.

“Thanks,” I say, shyly, but proudly.

Peter tries a few more times and then offers it to me, but I hold off, not wanting to embarrass myself with a poor throw.

We see Mama approaching.

“*Essenziet!*” she calls to us, still some ways down the road.

“*Wir kommen!*” I call back, eager to get eating.

“Thanks again,” I say to the boy. “We have to go eat dinner.”

“No problem,” he says, “was nice meetin’ yal!”

Mama and Papa sit out at the picnic table which is shaded from the mountain sun by our tattered awning. Papa is already eating as Mama is filling our bowls up with the pasta.

“*Agljo e Olio*” she says, smiling.

The next day we leave early in the morning, managing to roll out of the campground less than half an hour later than planned. We wind through sparse tress with rocky outcrops of grey stone. We pass deer and mountain creeks and cliffs along the way. Finally, we pull up onto a curvy, steep road which wiggles along the side of a small mountain. We creep our way up above the canyon and I peer down the plummeting drop feet beyond the edge of the road. Only a small metal rail separates us from cascading down a mountainside.

Mama grips the car door assist handle and the arm of the passenger seat chair.

“You think the trailer can make it up here?” Mama asks Papa, eyes cast down the slope.

“*Kein Stress*,” replies Papa.

We creep our way up to our driveway and I’m impressed with Papa’s driving skills when he manages to park in one piece right in front of the big grey house. I look around.

Mama and Papa turn to face us in the back seat.

“Welcome home.”