

## *Green River*

We escaped Merri’s mother’s place in Denver at one p.m. and made it as far as Green River, Utah, the halfway point to Los Angeles, before the road was too much of a blur to continue further. We found Green River a stubby oasis in a vast, high desert, west of the Rockies, in the parched nothingness known only for its dinosaur bones.

There’s a green river in Green River, and when we arrived and checked into the waterside, peach-colored motel, the summer sun was setting just over the wide but slowly flowing confluence, making me think of the last pulse of my own arteries. One day, you’re young, laughing, eating Cheetos, the next, you’re locked in a car with your wife and 11-year-old son, no one talking to each other, the acidity of anger drip drip dripping at your insides if not your wife’s.

At ten p.m., tired of the cable TV, son Harry wanted candy. Merri was in the bathroom, secluded. “Sure,” I said, reading the local paper, seeing who had won the local cow-chip-tossing contest, “Let’s get some candy. The sugar rush might do us good.” Overhearing, Merri said take our time in a tone that implied to me, “Drop dead.” Hell, she’d been the one to suggest we drive to Colorado so she could help her mother recover from hip surgery. I had asked what would Harry and I do there? She had said it’d be a fun family thing, that my accounting firm owed me a week’s vacation, and in Denver there’s fun stuff, the mountains, the new

aquarium, the zoo. We could do that while she communed with Mom.

Maybe I had misunderstood her. Then again, we had been tense for months in the way the very structure of potatoes, mail, and “your shoes” changes with the insertion of the word “damn.” Merri resented Denver—said she was trapped with her demanding mother while we were off at the aquarium, the zoo, hiking, having fun, etc., etc. I had gotten as far as saying, “But this is what you wanted,” when she banged the silverware around and said she wanted a divorce. I’d told her to grow up. She then gave me the finger and slammed the dishwasher shut. I smashed my hand down on the Formica counter, and she lunged at me, her hands in strangled fists, ready to hit. I grabbed her wrists to hold her. After we both struggled, and I saw the serious, deeply creased, and hateful look on her face—and imagined mine—for some reason I laughed. “We’re living in a sitcom,” I said. “Any moment we’ll get to the H.E.—the humorous epilogue.” She pulled back. Days later, we still hadn’t reached the H.E. If our tensions were guitar strings, we could play, “Cry Me a Green River.”

Anyway, now that we were here in Utah, candyless, Harry and I hopped in the car and drove across the Green River bridge to the truck stop on the other side. I parked by the front door of the mini-mart, not needing gas, and we beetled our way inside. Harry selected a Nutrageous candy bar, even though I told him the Salted Nut Roll was better. When he didn’t take my sage advice, I bought both bars to prove my claim.

Outside in the evening’s air and under the fluorescent canopy, we traded bits of each other’s bars to compare. The full moon was just coming up over the trees alongside the river. Crickets chirped, a gentle wind caressed our faces, and it was the best blessed moment of the whole trip. “See,” I said to Harry. “Be happy for the small things.” Beyond the trees lay the desert and the silhouette of scrub. Time and weather had eroded everything to sand and ash.

I chewed a bite of the Nutrageous. So did Harry. The peanuts, caramel, chocolate, and Harry’s look of concentration reminded me of when candy bars were all that mattered. We next bit into

chunks of the Salted Nut Roll—peanuts, caramel, and some mysterious white center that Harry wanted to know more about. I told him the center’s secret—always secret. Did it have spun sugar? he asked. Probably, but who knows how to spin sugar? Rumplestilskin? We ate. In a few minutes, we would have to return to the motel.

As Harry and I chewed like cattle eating cud, I noticed across the way that a good-looking, long-haired woman, early thirties in white shorts, was bending down the full-length of her long, tanned legs, touching her pink painted toes on her sandaled feet. She was limber enough and beautiful enough to be on a morning exercise show. She stood next to her green minivan, which was being gassed. A family car. Bend and stretch. I could see she wore a black tube top beneath a loose-fitting green shirt. She did a variety of moves, and one, the way she turned her head and her hair swung around her shoulders, made me flash on Merri in one of our more carefree days: Merri naked with me in a tent on the Kern River, the two of us like loons, laughing. This woman, however, had been sitting for hours, I guessed, and, by the dread of her looking at her watch, she probably would be sitting for a few more. After her exercises, she looked toward the mini-mart’s doors. As she walked past us and inside, I noticed her face more. I could see sadness. Did I perceive correctly?

We finished eating our treats—Harry declaring the Nutrageous the winner—and I decided because we were there, I’d get some gas, too. The open bay was on the other side of the woman’s minivan. As I filled her up, Harry wanted another candy bar “for the road.” Where did he get these lines? “You shouldn’t watch so much TV,” I said. I gave him money, and as he went in, the long-haired woman came out alone, ashen, looking as if each step was towards her death.

Harry was taking his time, so I went in to retrieve him. As we exited, the woman, leaning against the van, glanced at me. Her eyes reflected what would be, at any moment, tears. I then realized her attention was really on her husband, who was leaving the mini-mart behind me. He was a gentle, husky man her age with

short, blond hair. On his back in a carrier was a baby dressed in pink, and another little girl, maybe three, held his hand. He loaded his children into their car seats in the vehicle while I finished gassing and waited for the pump to print my receipt.

The woman moved slowly into the passenger’s side. From my angle, she carried her head very low, as if crying quietly. I couldn’t help but look into their van as I replaced the hose. She sat next to the man with her chin near her chest. The children in the back were quiet. He was gently telling her something, but she was leaning forward, keeping her head tipped as if gravity had won. The image of utter sadness tore at my stomach. My emotional response surprised me. After all, these were strangers, and I knew nothing of their problems.

I wondered if Merri and I had echoed our silences so loudly at gas stations. Maybe we could press push-pins into a map to chart our gas stops of despair. I continued to watch. He did not react in anger or tell her to grow up. Neither did he place his hand on her back or console her physically. He simply sat there, not looking at her, and spoke soft words to the windshield that I could not hear. She probably blamed him for her lousy life, and there was not a damn thing he could do.

At this point, Harry was extolling the virtues of Nutrageous over the Salted Nut Bar again, and he earnestly asked me if I thought my chocolate was really better. I realized in that moment, as I looked over at the van and saw a ghostly reflection of me inside my own windshield, that no matter how much hope you have, it cannot weave happiness. I touched Harry’s shoulder and told him as far as candy bars were concerned, go with your own impressions. Do what you have to do.