BORN ON THE RIVERBED

Out here no landmark stands taller than the grass but a few trees scattered haphazard.

Not a mountain or comforting hill rises above the flat to rope your bearings to. Folks have always had to use their heads to keep from getting swallowed up by all this gold and blue.

Most places got named following a compass and stepping off distance. Another way anchored locality around events.

Take where I live. A long time back, a day or so to the south, a man name of John Pilgrim pulled off the pioneer trail and decided to stay put in a place no sane man would've noticed. Others followed his lead, as some always will, and called the spot Pilgrim's Landing at first and later on Plymouth. Since Pilgrim's Landing or Plymouth or Jack's Landing, as it also got be called, was the first marker in a hundred miles of here, the homesteads that sprang up beside it were named by their bearings to it. Walk a day west and you'll find West Landing. North twenty miles and you'll hit a row of water tanks, Twenty North Plymouth.

Such names don't stir a mind to fancy now; but back then folks could say they were in a certain spot and not another. Around these parts that's a priority.

As I said, my speck of this grass platter lies about forty miles to the north of Plymouth. In the beginning, so few passed by here, my granddaddy didn't bother with a name. A mileage marker down the road read '40 mi. so. to Jack's Landing'. That seemed enough. Storms, or termites maybe, rotted off the ends of the sign finally and only 'so. to Jack's' was left. By the time I arrived in the world local folks had long been used to the sign that way and, lazy in their talk, said Soda Jack's with a "d". It's been nailed to the map just so ever since.

I've spun that tale to so many lost and frantic travelers rolled in here, desperate to know where they were and how they got here, I suspect I've made it come true, or as good as true gets, anyhow. It hasn't been so many years ago, that one way and another, I arrived here myself. Before that, I don't know. I lived somewhere and got schooled somehow. I imagine I

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A Short Story worked. I must've passed similar territory as the rest of them to get here, but no one has ever remembered the route.

I crossed over alone, not loaded down with families like some. Like most, I was carrying a

heap of junk collected over a lifetime. The old station wagon behind the barn has grass

growing through the floorboard now. Back then I had it packed to squeeze a flatworm.

Never bothered to unpack most of it. The doors rusted off ages ago and all that stuff I was

hell bent to haul, to God knows where, has long since blown off across the plains.

I remember as much as anyone I guess. Little flashes that pop up at odd times: Anguished

vapors gulping up chunks of light and landscape. People running away. That's the main one.

Hills and valleys in abundance but nobody bothering to appreciate them. And voices. Some

heard stern baritones, others lofty sopranos: Leave or be lost to an empty future!" The

command and the fog are common to those who fled here. Those running toward are rare.

They remember reaching for a beacon of blue. The pull of a forgotten promise.

Whatever brought them, the past is lost to all at the entrance to this maze. Tall grasses

rippling softly. Gilt crested waves that have made their way from a far inaccessible shore. It

lulls the memory into deep slumber. A day or two is soon eternity. As if chasing the crease

between yellow and blue was all there ever was. When one direction is exhausted a ninetydegree

turn spawns fresh hope. Eventually that runs dry and you turn and turn about.

I knew how Noah felt spotting the dove and branch when I noticed a farmhouse tucked

off the road under an oak tree. I was desperate for any punctuation to still the empty chaos. I

searched the premises, calling for help. There were three rooms, a garden and a barn. Doors,

front and rear, were unlocked but no voice answered mine. Inside, I found crisp carrots and

tomatoes, dishes in the sink, and a fat orange tabby with an agitated tail and accusing green

eyes. The owner couldn't be that far, so around and around I went, hollering into the yellow

fields. On the third or fourth turn I noticed fresh tire tracks leading away from the house.

They were wide and had deep double-x treads unlike my tires. On the porch a splayed out

sofa beckoned. Surely they'd be back soon.

I waited. Morning after morning. On the porch... staring down the road.

One hundred steps to the west.

One hundred east.

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A Short Story

Back and forth 'till the westerly road fell into the sun. In the half-light remaining I'd

gather dinner from the garden.

Weeks passed.

The garden wouldn't provide forever unless I kept it up. So I did. I had time. I

scrutinized every inch of the house to find a clue about its former occupant. There were

work-shirts and overalls in the closet, small on me, possibly belonging to a woman, but no

family pictures or letters. The large furniture remained, as if in hurried final moments it was

all too much.

I'd been a long time waiting when the hair on the cat's back settled flat. I can't say how

long. Only that I began to calm down, too. I dug up rocks in the garden whose color and

shape called out to me and placed them around the house in prominent locations. I don't

know why but they made me feel better. They were mine. After a while the clothes I'd found

didn't pinch so bad and the lumps in the bed dissolved into comfort. Some mornings I'd

forget that I didn't belong to the little house. The early light, dappled by the oak outside the

window, slanted to a square that framed my pillow. It flickered animation into the day in a

way that was toasty and familiar as if I'd lived a lifetime of those soft renewals.

Any certainty I'd once had that other human beings inhabited the world left me and my

ability to reason became increasingly suspect. Nevertheless, I had faint stirrings that the

course of my life had previously been directed elsewhere. I knew my only chance to retrieve

the direction was to use any logic I could muster to formulate a plan of escape. The little

house and garden was becoming dangerously cozy and I decided I had to fight it.

Inside the barn, a storage tank I'd assumed held water turned out to contain seventy-five

gallons of gasoline. The closest filling station, I figured, must be very far for the house's

owner to be so prudent. Adding that volume to the little I had left in the car, I calculated the

length of my leash to seven hundred miles. Dividing that into a search east and west, I could

explore the area around the house more fruitfully than attempting to travel the greatest

distance from it. If I recorded each turn, I wouldn't panic or waste fuel going in circles. I

could also find my way back.

Two days of chasing the morning sun depleted my hope by half. Each of the three

hundred and fifty miles of yellow draped road looked the same, a 3-D treadmill passing

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under my stationary car. Retracing my steps proved wise but tiresome. My chances were slim

to find a way out through uncharted territory, but nil on the return leg. I found myself

longing to get back to the little house\_and that scared me. How, in this absurd landscape,

had an abandoned cottage become the nest I recoiled to like an errant homing pigeon?

When I walked in the door the cat wove figure eights around my legs. I was grateful for

any attention. Even the tree seemed to wave its branches in greeting and embrace the house

defiantly against the sinister monotony of grass. When I came out on the porch later and

watched the sun's final performance before night's curtain, I wondered about a life where the

sun was a backdrop and not the central attraction. My eyes were tired and I turned to rest

them on the eastern sky. In the distance I saw another light. At first I thought it was

afterburn. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. The light appeared to split in two. Then I heard a

faint rumble and detected the sound of an engine.

Headlights!

A vehicle meant a driver. Someone that might have answers. Could save me! I fell to my

knees and raised my hands, trembling in thanks. I didn't pray but I knew what it was to be

grateful.

I hunkered down, fingers intertwined in front of my chest, frozen in anticipation. The

lights stared back, refusing to concede the slightest advance. The crickets in the tree started

up their nightly chorus and drowned out the sound of the motor. Maybe if I put my ear to

the road. I turned away briefly to promise the cat that help was coming. When I looked

again there was only darkness... Another delusion? Mirage? If there was even a slight chance I

had to know. I ran to the station wagon.

A mile down the road I saw the silhouette of a man cleaving my headlight beams in two.

The first look was the apparition of salvation I'd dreamed of. As I got closer I could tell he

was standing in front of a truck, his head back and his fingers intertwined in front of his

chest, as if in prayer. His eyes shot back my hope in two thin beams of twinkling reflection.

It was jolting, like ice cubes down my drawers. He thought I was coming to save him!

His wife and small son crawled out of a makeshift camper that was packed to the seams.

He said for all they knew they'd been on the road forever. There was no telling how long.

They couldn't remember starting out or how they got here. The boy, he said, remembered

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the most: a promise made but not who made it. It was their only link to any past. A new life

at the end of their journey. That's what they were headed for. But what it was... or where...

They were out of gas.

The man was about my age, prime of life I thought at the time, handsome and fit with a

youthful bearing of strength and endurance. Reduced to his knees, he was grabbing my

ankles, begging for answers. I was in shock, struck silent. In the wake of hysteria I had no

chance to speak anyway. Did I remember the promise? Did I know where we were... the way

out? Could I help save his family?

All I knew was I had to allay their fears and shelter them and somehow stay calm too. The

wife and son were hungry and sleepless. Talk, I said, would have to be put off 'till morning

when minds would be clear to think. I was hoping they'd sleep into the afternoon. I needed

time to come up with a plan.

The mother went straight to the little day bed I never used and tucked her son in, even

finding blankets somewhere I didn't know about. She and her husband took my bed only

after strong insistence. Sleep was hours away for me. Somehow I'd become the repository of

their hope and answers. The responsibility was awesome and chased away thoughts of my

own dashed prospects. Through the night and early morning I sat on the porch, traveling in

my mind down all the empty roads again, seeking any shred of distinction in the empty

checkerboard that could offer anyone a future. The east had turned up nothing and the west

was still unanswered. If it suggested a way out, the man and his family could find it as well as

I could and return to guide me. I decided to explain the situation as a mutual dilemma.

Someone would explore and someone would stay. Either way, if nothing turned up we'd

have to stretch resources and learn to get along.

"Wake up mister! Wake Up!"

The boy lifted my chin off my chest. His parents told him to leave me be, but it didn't

stop him. Through narrow slits I noticed the fence posts cast no shadow. It was already

midday.

"We're obliged to your hospitality," the man said when he was certain I was coming

around. He and his wife leaned over to talk, as if they were afraid to actually step closer.

They'd obviously been up for hours waiting for me to stir. The woman, I was shocked to see,

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had the cat cradled in her arms, stroking his purring throat as if they were old friends. "It's a

nice place you've built here," she said, "mighty nice..."

"But you see I never actually... I should explain..."

"Someday I'll build a place like this," the man interrupted, holding out his hand, "My

name is John... John... I can't... anyway my wife is Gretta and my son's Adam. We'll be out

of your hair if you could just point us to the closest gasoline."

They looked fresh and full of revived spirit. How could I tell them we were all lost? I

knew what it was to forget your last name. I wasn't a hundred percent about my first. Sam

seemed right but I couldn't recall hearing anyone say it.

"Sam." I said, shaking his hand. "The gasoline won't be a problem, but I'm afraid I don't

get out much into the world."

John looked around with real admiration. He said, "Can't blame you. Seems you've got

pretty near everything you need right here. Things for us got pretty muddled out there. If

you can tell us how to get to the next town I reckon we can straighten out our affairs from

there." I found myself matching him, talking in what I guess I thought was a rural dialect.

The words out of my own mouth surprised me. "I expect the best way outta here is west to

the second crossroads. There you'd cut south. Down there the next town is a hundred miles

'n' more, but long before that you'll run into some beautiful spots like this one. A nice big

tree or two means ground water for a well. I reckon you could carve out a little homestead

around one... if your other plans fall through, that is."

John was grateful for the advice but assured me he was on his way to a promised land.

When he got to civilization he was going to straighten out all this confusion. I knew his

certainty was as ethereal as what I was telling him. When I suggested it might be best for

them to stay on with me for a while, the grass maze being a dangerous journey, he bolted.

"That's one thing we can't do!" he said, looking to his wife, who launched the cat as if

suddenly allergic, "Our future is out there." I couldn't tell who was fooling whom. The

question of who stayed and who ventured forth was not open to discussion. Maybe his

mandate to leave came from the same muse that gave me the words to talk to him. It felt

right and seemed to be what we all needed, like the foundation of something that just might

stand.

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There was little more talk. I sent them off with some food and tools. The little boy found

jars of seeds laid up in the barn I'd missed by not crawling along the slotted rafters. It was my

turn to insist and I insisted they have them. I told them flat land played tricks on lots of folks

and not to fret too heavy. They should make a sure map of their journey and that way they

could always find their way back.

It wasn't until their truck was a dust plume sprouting off the western horizon that the

excitement I'd felt when I first spotted their lights came back in a rush. I wasn't old Sam

who'd lived here my whole life and I was certainly no fit guide to these whereabouts. They'd

come and gone and I'd given them my only chance to ever find a way out. As I walked

toward the house I began to sink into self-pity. I hung my head at the cat who seemed as

confused as I was. There, under her tail, in the dirt, I discovered the evidence of what John

and his family had given to me. The tracks laid down by their truck only moments before

matched the wide double-x tracks I found leaving the house the day I arrived!

For a while I worried about John and his family but I knew I couldn't have kept them

from seeking their promised land any more than someone could have kept me from running

away from whatever that was. For my part, being Sam felt good. As good a person to be as

whoever I was that I couldn't recall. I began to feel I had always lived in my little cottage

under the oak tree. I was comfortable in my own company, tending the garden, talking to

the cat, and walking in the broken sunshine. The loneliness I'd felt before was gone. In my

heart I knew John, Gretta, and Adam were out in the distance somewhere having a life and

I'd been part of it. I imagined them finding a little oasis, a tree or two, and a little patch of

land they could clear for their seeds. I didn't see how any promised land could be better than

that. Wherever they were, I was sure, like me, they had found a kind of peace.

Time passed and my beard grew several inches before another car showed up. I was

pulling weeds when I heard the brakes and saw the dust. It was two young men, must've

been in their early twenties, scared as rabbits. They were making a beeline from some godawful

doom, the nature of which had slipped their minds. They were desperate to know

where they'd gotten to. My imagination had been brewing for some time preparing for such

a visit and I told them my first version of the history of Pilgrim's Landing and Soda Jack's.

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The plains are a land of horizons and opportunities, I said, a great big Now as far as you can

see in any direction. We try not to bother too much with the past.

They were calmed a good deal by my certainty relative to theirs, which I'd counted on.

Still, they were anxious to fulfill their destiny, and said they had pity for the likes of me,

leading such a desolate life. They had plenty of gas, as much as I'd given to John and Gretta,

so I sent them west with similar instructions and little worry. They seemed concerned about

leaving me behind but I convinced them my role was to be the still point for the next folks

needing direction. When they were gone I decided to back up my story and set myself to

carving a sign to read "So. to Jack's".

The next ones came, sure enough, with others behind them and more just over the

horizon. Must be a dozen groups or more I've cast out from this anchor every which way.

When a family showed up out of the South and told me they'd been living in West Landing

but were moving on to Jason's Crossing up North\_a place I'd never made up or even heard

of\_I was filled with a satisfaction I can't describe. Now the folks that pass through are as

likely to be from around these parts as anywhere else. Sometimes they stop by, or send word

along, just to thank me for getting them started.

I've been happy here for at least ten years and I've come to think of Soda Jack's as a

magical place. Still, every so often, after waking in the sunshine and working a full day in the

garden, I'll look down the road and tell the cat I'm looking to hitch a ride with the next

passerby. I've said it so often she pays no attention. Even so, I can't stop thinking I'll pick up

and shift my axis, make a new map somewhere. There's nothing to be running from or

racing to, but I still have the urge to wander the world's surprises. Might be the fate of those

who find themselves at Soda Jack's. If so, I'll leave the place the way I found it, with the

window shade open by the bed.