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BEAUTIFUL PLACES

By Brady Udall

ME AND GREEN ARE HEADING THROUGH UTAH, mountains all around us, swinging with the Stones and milking our ninety-dollar Monte Carlo for everything she's worth, when there's a grinding chatter and we coast to a stop knowing that the old boat has pumped her last piston. According to the road sign we just passed, we're on the outskirts of a place called Logan. Me and Green look at each other and without saying anything, come to an agreement. We got a lot more than ninety dollars' worth out of this car, so we push it into a ditch at the side of the road and start walking.

We've come all the way from Alaska, where we worked on a fishing boat for the summer. In the winter months, when all we had was money and lots of time to spend it, we lived high on the hog; we had salmon and moose steak daily, we drank expensive beer and gambled a lot. It would have been paradise except for the unfortunate lack of women.

When the money ran out, one of our poker buddies gave us a tip about construction jobs in Arizona. The prospect of spending another summer knee-deep in fish guts had sobered us up considerably. Not to mention the women problem. If we were sure of anything, it was that Arizona had its fair share of women. So we bought the car and headed south. We passed through Canada in the spring. I have never seen such true beauty. Some days, the sky was so blue it brought me close to tears. Imagine it: the old car humming beneath your feet, the wind like a woman's fingers in your hair, bearing the smell of pine and fresh water and mint.

Sometimes, playing the Stones felt like desecration.

About halfway through Idaho I could tell there was something wrong with Green. Green is short and skinny and is missing his right hand. He has long brown hair and a sparse, stringy affair he calls a beard. He sat there for over an hour reading the nutrition information on the back of his Coors.

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Green doesn't say much to start out with, but he hadn't said a thing the whole day. I asked him if he planned on drinking that beer and he looked up at me, wide-eyed and startled, the kind of look my crazy Grandma Lou used to have when we'd catch her on the front lawn in the middle of the night, square dancing solo in nothing but her saddle shoes.

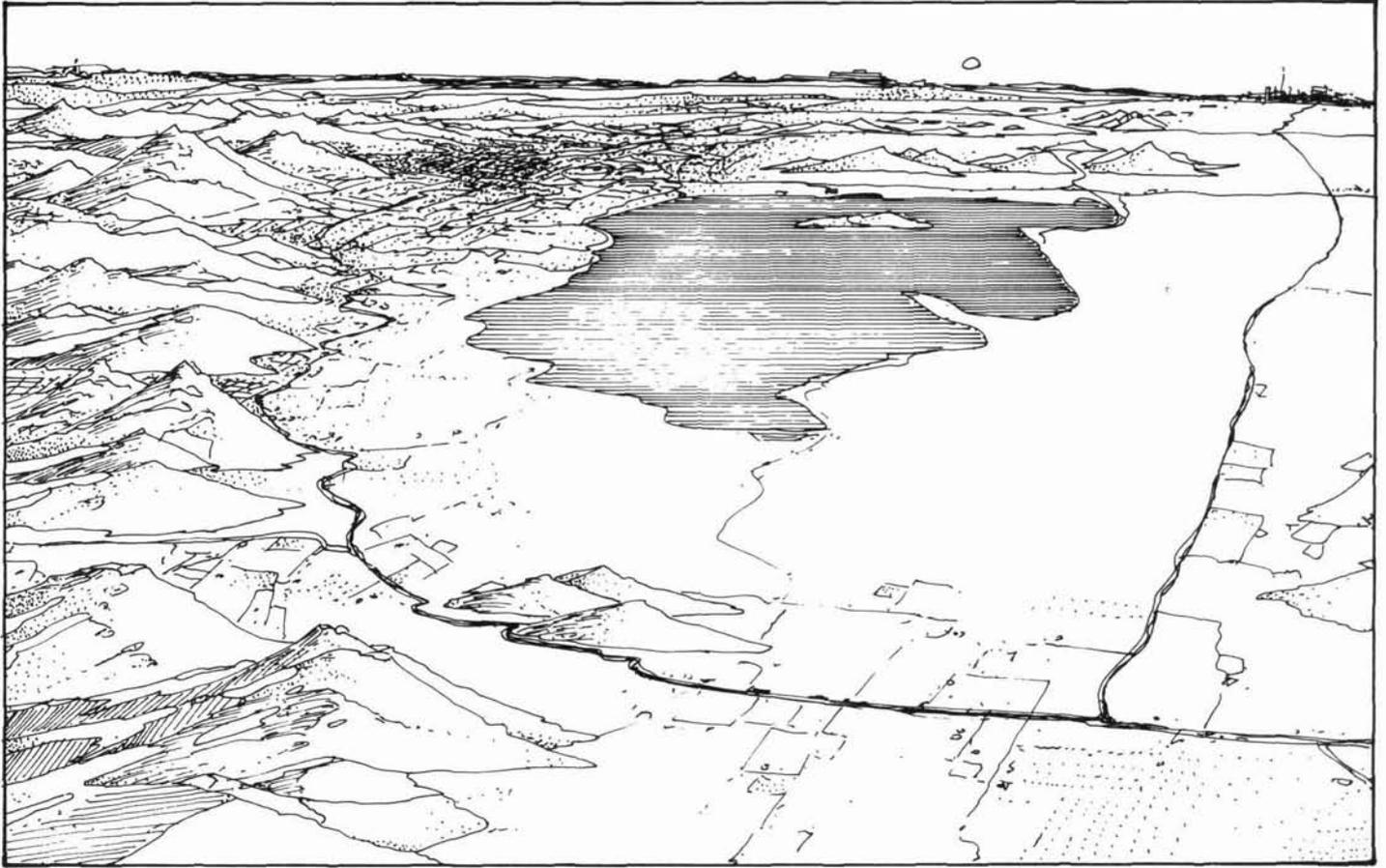
He thought about it for a while and then told me flat out that he didn't want to go through Utah. I said, What, and go through Nevada? Out of the question, I told him. Utah is a place of beauty. It is pure. Nevada has Las Vegas in it.

Green mumbled something to the effect that he didn't believe in beauty. That set me back some. Green is one of those dark, serious types, but once in a while he'll smile and it will make your whole day. Even though I am thoroughly uneducated and only twenty-nine, I know a thing or two about beauty, and I, for one, believe in it. I have seen trees full of eagles in Oregon and Sioux children riding bicycles over snowy roads in the Black Hills. I have traveled all over and have seen a good deal of the loveliest things on earth. I told Green about the things I have seen. I asked him if these things don't count as beauty.

Green went back to reading his beer and said, Couldn't tell you.

It was too late to take a detour around Utah, and as we entered the state, I felt justified. We were in a little valley with a river to one side of us and purple mountain majesty all around. There was still snow on the peaks and in the shadowy places, and I let go of the steering wheel and held out my arms wide as if to say, Look what we might have missed!

Green paid me no attention, and this was when our car gave out on us. I don't know if Green had some kind of premonition about something like this happening and that is why he didn't want to go through Utah. I wouldn't doubt it, though. Green is a lot smarter than most people would give him credit for. You see a guy with long hair and beard and missing his right hand, and you think he's a criminal or an idiot. It's just the way people are. They take one look at a guy and think they



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know everything.

We walk toward the center of town, and the place seems fairly deserted. There's nobody on the streets, and a car passes every once in a while. I wonder if we have taken a real back road. When I travel I don't use a map. I don't know how to fold the damn things, much less read them. This gets me into trouble once in a while, but I adjust. Sometimes I'll end up in a town that doesn't even have a gas station or maybe find myself on a road that leads nowhere, just stops dead at a wheat field or gradually gets narrower and full of weeds until there isn't a road any more. I will take surprises like this over maps any day.

We're walking along and I ask Green what his theory might be as to why there's nobody around. The road is wide and new, and right now we're passing a shopping center. I don't figure he'll give me an answer; Green is mad at me for coming into Utah. When Green is mad he generally doesn't say anything at all. We walk along for quite a stretch and Green says, "It's Sunday." I don't know if this is an answer to my question or just a comment on things, but I don't push it. I'm just glad Green is speaking.

After we've walked a mile or so we hear singing, singing so

beautiful it could break your heart or make you sterile. We have no choice but to walk to it. Green doesn't seem to be so keen about going to the singing but he follows me anyway. The music is coming from a big gray church on a hill. The church's tall doors are wide open, and it's like angels singing in heaven. I stand there and let it float around me, my eyes closed, until it stops. At times like this I wonder why I'm not a religious man.

Me and Green are down to pocket change, and I, for one, am hungry. We spent our last twenty-dollar bill for gas in Idaho Falls. There are stairs that lead up to the doors, and I go stand at the bottom of them. I figure if you ever need a hand, a church can't be a bad place to start. Green lets me know that, no offense against God, he'd rather not go into that church. I tell him if anyone is going into the church, it will be me. I climb the stairs and go inside the doors to some kind of entrance room with people sitting on padded benches. They all stare at me, and I act like I'm admiring architecture. There are a couple of women holding crying babies and a few other young folks all done up in ties and dresses. In the main room, which I can't see, someone is talking about the final days. One of these babies is screeching like the world is coming to an end this very second.

I notice a kid with a crew cut who doesn't seem to be enjoying himself. He's fidgeting, and he has the look of someone who has swallowed something entirely unpleasant. I catch his eye and motion for him to come out. He's about nineteen or twenty and big-boned. He looks around and steps outside but keeps his distance. I hold out my hand. He shakes it and retreats a few feet.

I tell him my name and explain our situation: coming from Alaska, our breaking down, no money or food. I ask the kid if he knows where we could find a bit of work so we can make enough money to buy a bus ticket to Arizona or at least get some lunch.

The kid looks at me, perplexed. I feel bad for getting him out of church and taking advantage of the Christian charity that has most likely been so recently drilled into him.

Maybe you know someone who needs their lawn mowed, I say.

The kid looks back into the church and then around at the houses on the street. He says, I don't think you can find much work, it being Sunday.

He looks down at Green, who has his hands in his pockets, trying to hide the one that's not there. Green is watching water run down the gutter.

We don't want handouts, I say, which is the truth.

You could mow my lawn if I had one, the kid says. Maybe you want to wash my car? I have a car.

We wash cars, I say. We're experts.

Good deal, he says.

Just trying to break the ice a little, I point to the kid's head and say, That's quite a hairdo you've got. When I was in the Army they made us cut our hair like that. What's your excuse?

The kid stares at me. I was expecting at least a smile, but I'm not getting one. After a minute I say, Why don't we go get that car washed?

We go down the stairs and get Green and the kid, whose name we find out is Buck, acquainted. I don't know why, but Buck is the right name for him. He's got ears like frisbees and nice teeth. He wears a tie and cowboy boots. I've never seen anybody do that before.

We get in his car, and he takes us to his apartment. Buck has a garter belt hanging from his rear view mirror, and if the tapes on the floor are any clue, he listens to an unhealthy amount of heavy metal. I wonder what a guy like this would be doing in church.

Where you guys from? Buck says.

I tell him I'm originally from Pittsburgh and even though I haven't been back in a number of years, I am still a dyed-in-the-wool *Steelers* fan and follow the *Pirates* when I can.

What about you? Buck says to Green.

Green says, I am from nowhere, really. All over, I guess.

I myself don't know where Green is from. I don't even know how he lost his hand. Green has said to me that he doesn't talk about things that have happened in the past because they're over with and why talk about them? Back in Alaska I could get him really drunk, and once in a while he would talk about the old days. I never got him to say anything about how he lost his

hand, but once he told me about the wife he used to have, and the two kids, and how they went to a zoo and a big tiger peed all over them from about twenty feet away. We laughed about that until we peed all over ourselves. After we got cleaned up, Green kept on telling me about his wife and kids. It was like once he started he couldn't stop. He told me about the trips they took and how he taught his two boys to play chess before they turned five. They were geniuses, he said. Einsteins.

I don't think Green remembers telling me all that. At least he's never mentioned it. Someday I plan to ask him to tell me where his family is, what happened to them. I think this would explain some things. Someday, when we've been together long enough for Green to trust me, he will tell me everything. I don't doubt it a bit.

So we wash and wax Buck's car with some stuff he gives us. The car is an old Cougar, painted gold with mags and a spoiler—the works. We labor over that car with a sense of pleasure. It has been so long since I have washed a car that it feels more like entertainment than a chore.

Green seems to have loosened up, and that helps. He even whistles while he buffs the hood with a rag he's twisted around the stump of his wrist. I spray Armor All on the tires and wipe the chrome so clean I can see the pores on my face in it. I try to keep my mind on my work, but girls in long dresses walk by, and I am instantly distracted. When a breeze blows their skirts above their calves I feel something flutter down the length of my spine. Green doesn't even notice them.

When we're done, the car is a bright and shiny wonder, a revelation.

I say to Green, This is beauty, right before your very face, and we are responsible for it.

Green doesn't say anything, but he smiles, and even though we're stuck in some place without a car or money and have to wash some kid's car just so we can eat, we are truly happy about it.

Buck comes out with a sack of food in his arms. He's got some faded Wranglers on, and he now looks a natural in boots. He's got a dog with him, a blue- and black-spotted cow dog with two different colors of eyes: green and yellow. The dog's narrow face and eyes make it look intelligent somehow. It looks smarter than the majority of my friends.

Buck says, You guys are professionals.

I just make a humble shrug and say, Shucks. Green rubs the dog's ears.

Buck says, I'd invite you guys in for lunch, but I've got too many roommates in there taking up space. I know a nice place we can go to eat without a lot of noise.

Buck takes us to a nice shady spot next to the river, says this is where he likes to take his girlfriends when they need privacy. It's getting to be late in the day, and there seem to be blackbirds everywhere, squawking and flapping in the trees. Robert (the dog's name, as Buck has informed us) scrambles out of the car and makes a beeline for the river. He jumps in with a huge splash and paddles around, yapping like crazy.

Dog's a fish, Buck says, shaking his head.

We sit down under a cottonwood and eat ham sandwiches

and large portions of store-bought macaroni salad. We watch the dog and laugh. He's on the other side of the river, sopping wet and jumping high in the air to snap at buzzing june bugs.

We're finishing off the last of a box of Ding Dongs when Buck says to Green, What happened to your hand?

I watch Green pick at the grass, and I hold my breath. Nobody, including me, has ever asked him that question point-blank. Still tearing up grass, he says in a low voice, Got smashed in some machinery where I worked down in St. George. They had to cut it off.

Buck says, So you're from down south.

Green just nods. I don't know what to say, so I keep my mouth shut. Green looks up at Buck.

You a Mormon? he says. You were in that church.

Buck nods, says, Try to be. You?

I was for awhile, Green says. My wife wanted me to be a member, so they baptized me. I was the scout leader for a couple of years.

Green has a funny look on his face, a look I've never seen before. His eyebrows are pushed up and together. His eyes are bright. He looks desperate. I continue to keep my mouth shut.

I was a scout, Buck says. Almost an Eagle, but I took cigarettes to a campout once, and they never let me back.

Green sighs and says, They'll do that.

Buck puts the last Ding Dong in his mouth. It looks like a hockey puck. Robert comes back to us and lies down next to Buck, munching on a June bug and smelling like a wet dog. The sun is right on us now, just above the mountains and coming in through the leaves. The top of Buck's crew cut shines, and Green's face is hidden in the shadow of his hair.

I still know a few hymns, Green says. I always liked the hymns.

He whistles part of a nice song I have heard him whistle before.

I just don't know the words, he says.

I can't sing, Buck says. Never could.

Buck says to me, You a Mormon, too?

Nope, I say. Though I wish I was one at the moment, for some reason. To tell the truth, I don't exactly know what a Mormon is. Somebody says Mormon, and I think of old men in beards and black hats. This Buck is a Mormon. Green says he used to be. I would never have guessed Green was a one-time church-goer. All of this is definitely interesting.

I listen to them while they swap a few Boy Scout stories and talk about Buck's problem with everybody wanting him to be a missionary. I never heard Green talk so much, and I'm fairly certain he's not drunk. He even gives Buck some advice about women.

I listen for as long as I can, but there is something so tight in my chest it hurts, and I can't listen anymore. I get up and throw off my clothes and jump with Robert into the river. The water is cold and deep; it comes from old glaciers close to the sky. The current is slow and pushes me slowly forward and down. Robert and me chase each other back and forth. I look over from time to time where Green and Buck are talking and laughing. There they are discussing religious matters, while

I'm in the river with a dog.

After a while, Green and Buck strip down to their underwear and dive in after us. Green's skin is so white it is almost blue. Buck comes up, water rolling off him, sputtering like a kid. He takes Green in a bear hug and dunks him under. I whoop like a drunk Italian and jump on both of them. Robert gets ahold of my arm with his teeth and tries to pull me away. The water is so cold we all have to yell. Even Robert howls.

The sun is on the water in pieces, and blackbirds and June bugs zoom around our heads. Once we're all in the river, gulping water and splashing around, I just don't care that Green opened up to this kid he's known less than a day after staying closed with me for so long. Green is free and easy, the happiest I've ever seen him, and I can't help but be happy too. I get him in a headlock, and we wrestle like alligators.

The current pushes at our legs, dragging us slowly along to where the sun is going down. We stop struggling and let it take us; we let everything go in that river. I close my eyes, and I'm so numb it's like I'm floating on air toward someplace full of light and quiet. I get out only when the pain between my legs reminds me what all this cold might do to the general health of my gonads.

I struggle up on the bank and see that the current has taken me farther than it has the others. Green is already under the tree trying to get his clothes on and not having much luck. When you're one-handed and shivering to beat the band, putting on your clothes can be a pretty awkward process. I run over and help him get his legs in his pants.

Once we get his shirt buttoned up, Green says, We should be on our way. It's almost dark.

The peaceful look he had in the river is gone. Now he is back to his pinched, worried self. His hair is sopping wet, and he looks like he's just had the water squeezed out of him.

We need to get going if we're ever going to make those construction jobs, he says. We can hitchhike if we have to.

Buck comes up from the river, tiptoeing among the weeds and sharp rocks with Robert right behind him. The cold water has turned Buck bright pink. He is rubbing himself warm and saying, Oh mama, oh mama.

I stand there, a light breeze raising up goose bumps all over me and say, This would be my only wish right now: a big fluffy towel, a hot bubble bath and massage afterwards, preferably at the hands of a female.

You guys are welcome to my apartment, Buck says. I can supply at least some of that. And I have a sleeping bag and some blankets. We'll get some tickets, and I'll take you to the bus station in the morning.

I look at Green, who is putting our garbage into a paper sack. I don't understand it, but I can tell that his only wish at the moment is to get out of here as quick as possible. He looks like he's ready to bolt any second.

I think for a minute and say, Thanks a million, but we've got to keep moving. These construction jobs won't wait forever.

Putting on his clothes, Buck says, Then let me take you to the bus station now. I'll get the tickets. You did a hell of a job on my car.

You took us out here and gave us lunch, Green says, his face twisted and unreadable. You've been too nice to us already. If you can just drop us off someplace, we can get a ride.

Buck rubs his hand over his damp head and looks confused. I feel pretty much the same way. Not being the pushy type, Buck just shrugs a little and takes us to the other end of town where the main street turns into the highway that will take us to Salt Lake. He gives us forty dollars and tells us it's the money for our car.

He says, Tomorrow I'll tow it over to the junk yard. Lyle Dooley is a friend of my father. He'll give me at least that much for it.

For some reason I want to give Buck a hug, but I wouldn't really know how to go about it, so instead I deliver the most

sincere handshake possible. Green gives him a nervous handshake, thanking him for everything, and turns away. We both give Robert a scratch between the ears before Buck drives back into Logan.

We get a ride with an old couple as far as Salt Lake, and just before dawn, we get on with a trucker headed for Phoenix. Once we're in the cab, the road beneath us, moving away, and the musty old guy next to us telling bad jokes one after the other, Green finally settles down a little. The wrinkles in his forehead smooth away, and he puts his head against the window and closes his eyes. The light is just coming up, turning the snow on the mountains purple and orange. The sky is opening sharp and clear. I can't be sure, but I guess a place like this is just a little too beautiful for Green to stand. 



BLUE CHINA

You have come half-way in love
through the dangerous sea throat
of dull surprises, shadow-vacancies;
alone, perfumed and powdered
to await on the pier your tall photo-husband.

The message you bring in low sounds
tender, plaintive, simple. Your hymns
praise age-old habit: well water, rock on bone;
the gentle scrape of Time against saint shins.
Red poppies blossom at home and ill uncles
eat them—here you see people ticketed
for spitting, drinking beer in the park,
courting under statues of generals.

He does not wander
down-valley gold or glittering,
goading mail-draped elephants
and silken servants;
he stands stiff, tall, white-proud.
He smells of burned woods, dry lakes and
he is lovelier than the picture—slim, blond, rich—
you are alone on the shore,
not worthy of attention,
your face a gray church tower,
your hands pink with dog-roses.

—SEAN BRENDAN-BROWN