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BUFFALO LIGHTS: Maryland to New Mexico

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Prologue: The Myth

We were driving home after dark from Taos to San Cristobal the way we usually did, past the Indian lands to the east. As we neared the place where Kathy liked to spot the pueblo's dark brown buffalo herd at the foot of the mountain, she stared into the deepening gloom and mused, "They sure would be easier to see if they'd put lights on them."

Buffalo lights! How utterly improbable yet somehow plausible in the context of this place. Whether she knew it or not, she had created a nugget of myth that would tie us to the great beasts forever, for neither of us would ever pass that way again without remembering.



Chapter 1: Imprinting

For me, nature has always been key. All my life I've been pulled, guided, and enthralled by nature. When I was a boy it was a mud puddle that lasted long enough to grow tadpoles, or better yet (and most incredibly) a pond, seething with life and brimming with mystery, or woods with trees to climb and look out from. The main impulse was to get away from the houses and the people and find the *other* things—animals, plants, secret shrines of nature—things I could only see if I went “exploring,” as I used to call it. Nature still has a fighting chance here on the Eastern Shore, and more than a few of those shrines, but who knows for how long?

I called many places home before moving to the town where Granny lived. Here in Chestertown I've played the role of “native outsider” for over 20 years, a local when it suited me, or a Texan when the need arose, but in many ways I've been more of a native than I usually thought. I even lived here for brief periods when I was a boy, usually during times when my Air Force father was on temporary duty somewhere in the world. My mother and I would stay with her family in Baltimore or with my grandparents, at first in Sudlersville and later in Chestertown. We also lived nearby at Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, D.C. and later in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. In those years the family made frequent visits to the Eastern Shore.

At Andrews I used to go out into the “wilderness” behind the apartment building, a large wooded area with a broad stream flowing through, where I could catch crayfish in the clear, clean water flowing over speckled gravel. Those expeditions to the creek were incredibly intense and engrossing, probably the most

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exciting thing a five-year-old could do. In my mind's eye, I can still see the crayfish in my pail quite clearly and even follow the path from the stream to our back door.

I remember solitary walks through my grandparents' neighborhood in Chestertown, down Campus Avenue and over to my uncle's house. There were cornfields then instead of houses, and during winter visits I could walk through the stubble all the way down to the marsh. In the summers my cousin and I would capture any small animals we could find. Once we found an exhausted bat clinging to a tree trunk after a thunderstorm. We put it in a shoebox and examined it for a while, then let it go in the evening after proudly showing off the hissing creature to our parents as they sat having cocktails on the porch.

I remember going to nearby Tolchester on the bay when I was just a toddler, where my father rowed me around in a rented skiff. I remember the salty tang of the water and the pungent odors of the old wooden boat. There was seaweed then; great wads of green, all over the beach, and many, many shells, and hardly any trash. Those were the days of millions of oysters, when the water was clear, back before the Bay Bridge killed the ferryboats and opened up the Eastern Shore for real estate and outlet malls.

When I unexpectedly found myself in Chestertown again in 1975 after a chaotic, pell-mell move from Texas to the woods of Maine, it was as if I'd blundered into a post-hippie, nature lover's paradise. A person could rent a house in the country, maybe even on the water, for so little money that it hurts to remember. One of the first things I did that fall was go out to Bloomfield Farm to pick walnuts. There I got to know the tall bluffs and the wide Sassafras River, and later I'd return on a regular basis to go skinny-dipping. You had to be friends with whoever was renting the main house or know how to sneak down to the water, but the isolated beach was always worth the effort.

I spent what seemed like years on the water. When we lived in Pomona, I'd go sailing from the nearby landing on the Chester

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River every couple of days in the summer and fall. Later at Castle Hill Farm where I loved it so much, in the true wilderness of the Eastern shore, I made the creek and the river my second home. My wife and I would take Chris' grandfather's wooden boat, benignly powered by an antique outboard, up the river to the foot of High Street to get the Sunday papers. The trip would take about 45 minutes each way. On the way back, Kathy would laze across the bow reading the NY Times Magazine and getting a tan. The journey always reminded me of scenes from "The African Queen," minus the leeches, despite the fact that Katherine Hepburn didn't bare her bosom to the sun the way my honey did.

In our present home we've been very close to nature and have at one time or another spotted just about everything there is to see in these parts: deer, turkeys, geese, foxes, raccoons, woodchucks, skunks, squirrels, mice, voles, snakes, lizards, eagles, hawks, quail, pheasants, herons, ducks, flying squirrels, shrews, bats, owls, frogs, and a dead weasel. One morning I saw a female pheasant walk across the front yard like she owned it.

That, and the interaction with my friends, is what I've loved most about living here. I care little for the alleged advantages of being close to Washington and Baltimore, but I love the swans I see fly over in November. I relish the glorious gold and pink sunsets we get on cold clear winter evenings. I glory in the fox running across the road. I'm also very sad that on my summer walking route, I no longer see the indigo buntings that used to fly along a certain stretch of country lane where a thoughtless newcomer bulldozed 1,000 feet of hedgerow—if only he'd been able to grasp how all things are connected.

The Chesapeake Bay seems frighteningly close to the edge of destruction because of all the people living on its shores and the things we people do. There's simply no way to reconcile this much development and a viable environment, no way at all, despite the activist fervor and "Save the Bay" license plates. There are already far too many of us living here, flushing our toilets, fertilizing our lawns, cutting down trees, and throwing

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out the plastic junk that ends up strangling fish or littering the beach. We can do more damage more quickly than aboriginal societies were ever able to manage, yet where is our responsibility, where the sense of doing what is best for all?

Make no mistake about it, this is still a beautiful land. However, after growing up nearby and living here for 25 years, I've become someone who knew it in "the good old days," and I'm in need of fresh perspectives. For that reason alone as far as nature is concerned, I'll take my childhood memories of a pristine Bay surrounded by quiet fields and fade into the sunset. It hurts to leave the geese behind, but even they go elsewhere in the spring.



Especially now, as I grow older, I yearn to feel the power of a landscape closer to the one God gave us and wonder how hard I could fight to save what's left here if I were to stay. I've been very happy on the Eastern Shore, and the Chesapeake Bay—polluted or not—will still be there long after I'm gone. But natural spaces in this part of the world too often have a sad, desperate quality to them, as if they sense their fragility in the path of encroaching development. Maybe if enough people acknowledged the *sacredness of nature* and took steps to change the way they live, we could hold off the inevitable a bit longer. Nature is still magnificent in the far corners of this place, after all, and that is where my heart has been.

For now, I salute the best of those I leave behind, the true nature-loving, rural, hipster iconoclasts, living here as long as they can in their natural enclaves like tadpoles giving it a go in a slowly-drying puddle. I will always count myself among your number, brothers and sisters, and I truly wish you well.



Chapter 2: Blood Rites

When we returned from our errands that afternoon and pulled up to the garage here in our country paradise, with all the birdies singing and the sun shining down on the fresh green jungle, I knew a certain singular moment had arrived: time to cut the grass! The first grass cutting of every year is a kind of religious ceremony—by July it will be a hot, stinking, deerfly-swatting chore, but for now it has special significance. One must approach the task in just the right frame of mind and only after going through all the required exercises, the first of which is, of course, raising the Deere from the dead.

The seasonal resurrection of the tractor is accomplished through three days of battery-charging, tire-inflating, and prayer, in this case started earlier in the week. When I'm sure it really will start and run reliably, I prepare myself by donning appropriate dedicated clothing and partaking of my choice of intoxicants. 2.57 acres are not to be approached soberly in any case, and opening day is a special occasion, after all. This time the unpredictable old machine fired right up, belching blue smoke with a roar and a rattle, signaling that the moment was exactly right and that I had no time to lose. I ran back into the house to put on my shorts, an expendable long-sleeved shirt, and an old pair of running shoes; tossed back a couple shots of tequila, and backed out of the garage.

Where to make the all-important, highly symbolic First Cut? I decided on the "back forty," actually just the lowest, most distant patch of field, down near the woods. This would truly be an afternoon of blood sacrifice because of the freshly greened arcing multi-flora branches around the perimeter. (If you're too lazy to

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trim them first, you get lashed. I got lashed.) Dripping more blood than an Aztec priest, I churned my way around the once-more familiar plot of ground, reconnecting with the earth and the spirits of the place. It was pretty and it smelled good. The John Deere didn't skip a beat, the drive belt didn't slip in the tall damp grass, and by the time I was finished I was sorry it was too late in the day to cut much more. Once again I was in love with this small corner of the world, a place I would soon be leaving.

Reality check: yes, we were leaving. Moving to where the thick grass and soft dark soil would be a distant memory. Not that there wouldn't be a chance to end up in another spot like this perhaps, but sagebrush, *piñon*, and rocks were much more likely. I love all that too, but I had to ask myself: was this my real nature, to be at one with the damp green jungle and the perfumed air? The truth was that it was in my blood (literally). I first realized that when I came back years ago to this slice of earth I had visited many times as a child, and I thought of it again as I mowed.



The fear and urge to undo what we'd set in motion was a shock at first, but I suppressed it and mowed on until the setting sun and gathering chill drove me back inside. Later that evening I reflected on it all, especially the powerful feelings I credited with setting us up to take the blows I knew were coming. There was more going on down deep than I could ever get across to puzzled friends or even to myself. I thought about the stages I'd gone through in all my wavering and raving and lingered on a meditation about my oh-so-patient wife.

It was sobering to realize how long I'd heard but never really understood. She'd been right all along, on course as surely as the

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best of them: seers, visionaries, medicine women, all those things good Methodist girls from Des Moines aren't raised to be. But she was born some distance west of there, on the rolling black dirt prairie, a little closer to the wildness of the West. There had always been an elemental, independent spirit, and now it was closer to the surface.

For several summers we'd traveled to New Mexico or Colorado, sometimes Texas. We'd camped out in Big Bend and the Davis Mountains, hiked down the Ute Trail near Estes Park, and seen a lot of Colorado and New Mexico. Taos was a favorite spot but not immediately adopted. I saw things that reminded me of the detritus of the bleeding-edge High Weirdo culture I'd loved in Austin in another life, and perhaps I felt like I'd seen it all before.

But for years we'd subscribed to the Taos News, and each issue's arrival was a real event. Not long ago I sorted through a stack of back issues and realized she'd been circling real estate ads for at least three years! We'd discussed this one or that one, compared features, location, and imagined ourselves living here or there. Of course I'd heard, but had I paid attention?

The yellowed newspapers with the circled ads made the point belatedly but loudly. My God, how long had she been coming home from work and declaring, "I just can't do this anymore"? I'd heard, all right, but besides perceiving that my comfy setup was under siege, had I really understood? Once in a while, seemingly out of the blue, she would say something like, "We should go spend a week there at Christmas," a statement I was never sure whether to take as a call to act or not. But now, as I sat in front of a pile of old New Mexico newspapers and trip souvenirs, I suddenly saw that there had been a veritable *procession* of signs, omens, inspirations, and sincere declarations of the soul stretching back for years. All this time I'd wanted the adventure too, though I must not have believed deep down in my soul that she would really come or that I'd finally have the nerve to go.

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After all, we already had a place to live. There were trees here that I had planted from tiny seedlings given away on long-past Arbor Days, and gardens all around. We'd gone through most of the bad stuff, from termites under the front porch to leaking water tanks and heaters in the basement. One by one we'd either fixed everything that was broken or gotten used to it. When I sat at my computer I could look out through the spacious second-floor windows across the fields to a wooded horizon. In the spring and fall, when the sun shone bright and clear and everything was beautiful, I would ask myself: who in his right mind would ever want to leave this place? There was even a large gravestone with my name on it, back in town: "FARR" was all it said, but that was plenty.

We also had our friends, of course. Neither of us had ever lived so many years in one place, so most of the people we knew were very old friends indeed. Who could even begin to imagine what it would be like to leave them here? In my case the isolation of my Internet writing job and our house in the country seemed to insulate me from potential trauma. I loved my friends but rarely saw them, except at the odd supermarket parking lot encounter or a couple of times a year at community social events. Under these conditions moving to the Southwest was just a matter of moving "a little farther out of town," I told myself. There'd been more interaction in the past when everyone was young, before babies and liver transplants, but life was more encapsulated now. My own world had narrowed rapidly to focus on my thoughts about New Mexico, the Internet, and how I would support myself. Aside from my many e-mail correspondents, there didn't seem to be anyone else sharing this space except for Kathy and the cat.

I've been joking that doing what we're contemplating is like having a baby: no matter how many books you read about what to expect and how to prepare, there's no substitute for the real thing. Every birth is different. Every person is different. And so it is with pulling up stakes and leaving town: at least there won't be

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any predetermined standard to measure up against. We'll be new at everything we do and get no practice, having little or no ability to undo any particular step. *That we will go* is no longer in doubt, though all the rest is, so here we are now, planning the hairiest disruption and the biggest drama of our lives.

This is an affair of the heart, after all, and logic will only take us so far.

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