

PLESIOSAURS

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When God made Kansas, I think he got a little lazy. Or bored, or tired, or whatever. Get about twenty miles out from Kansas City going west and you can feasibly walk all the way to the Rockies, had you the energy, had you the gumption. Um, it's really flat. My Grandpa says it's God's most perfect little rectangle on his finely machined cue ball. It's a friendly place, too, barring any major transgression. The people who lived here since forever got along pretty well, better maybe than most in the world at any given point. I've never met any of those people, though. I've been told that herds of bison swam through the prairie like a bazillion fish through a reef, but I've also never met a bison, except for up in the Dakotas. The bison and their people are gone, and so is that reef that they used to swim through, but the land is still kind. It can only put up with so much, though. They cut the prairies down for corn and soybean and alfalfa and, chiefly, wheat. My great-great-grandparents were victims of Kansas' tough love, it was called the Dust Bowl, but they both made it through. The warmth of the land returned eventually, as did the wheat. I don't know much about that time—I never met either of my great-great-grandparents—but my Dad tells me that they would've loved me.

There's some tornadoes, too. I never saw one, but my uncle J—

“That's enough August, you can have a seat.”

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I got a D- on that one. We had to do a presentation in our geography class about a state which was drawn from a hat, and I lucked into talking about Kansas. We were in Salina, a bullseye on the American dartboard, and I, like the 12 other students in the 5th grade, had rarely ventured beyond its borders. No one had been to a different country, one kid had gone further west than the Rockies, two had been further east than the Mississippi, and no one had gone north beyond the badlands. More than a few had been as far south as Texas, but no one had seen an ocean. Given our very limited perspectives, I hit the jackpot. I got to skip the reading, wing the presentation, and spend our dedicated preparation time reading old books about John Brown and newer books about KU basketball. I thought that my stellar fifth-grade vocabulary would carry me through. It was the first time I failed something at school, probably because I completely

ignored the guidelines to orient the presentation around the state's major rivers. No special points for my blasphemy either. I thought I had reached the essence of the state, something far beyond the function of its waterways or population demographics, but apparently, I had not.

I'm older now. I understand nuance. I've been further west than the Rockies and I've been further east than the Mississippi and I've seen an ocean and I've been to Texas. I don't get Ds anymore, I go to Law School. I moved away from Salina, my sister did too, and Mom and Dad moved to Kansas City where they could have easier access to healthcare and whatnot. I moved up north to Chicago to go to school and my sister moved out west to Sacramento to continue her career as some kind of tech engineer. I always see Mom and Dad on my holiday breaks from school, and I always make an effort to go down to Kansas City sometime during the summer, but I hadn't seen my sister for almost two years. One day, she sent me a text asking if I'd like to go see Grandma and Grandpa, who were buried out in the Gypsum Hill cemetery, and I obliged. Her flight into KCI was late by a few hours, so we only made it to Emporia before we had to stop for the night.

This wasn't a very happy trip. The two hour ride from the airport to our shitty Econo Lodge was nearly silent despite the amount of catching up we had to do. She sat in the passenger seat with one leg curled up like a cat that hasn't decided whether or not to itch its face yet. I used to get mad at her when she did that, insisting that, if we were to get in a car accident, the airbags would shoot her knees through her head. I jokingly referenced this, and my energy was not reciprocated. With the

vibes in turmoil, I just sat sentry in the driver's seat. I'd never learned how to break through in these situations and thought it would be best to do nothing at all.

It was around 11:30 when we got to our exceedingly cold and uncomfortable room. It had a nice warm brown color scheme, but the mattresses felt like oatmeal and the sheets felt like hospital gowns. After two or three hours, it was clear I was not going to sleep that night, and I went outside to my car to get some air and have a cigarette. Some minutes later, my sister followed me outside.

"You smoke fucking cigarettes now?"

"Uh, not really. Someone left these in my car."

"Sure bub." She said that incredulously, and extended her hand, requesting one for herself. Me smoking isn't a secret, but I knew she would ask for one and I felt bad potentially igniting a bad habit for her, so I tried to keep them hidden as best I could. But it had been a long day, so we shared a cigarette leaning back on the hood of my car.

I asked: "Do you wanna go check out the prairie?"

"Sure."

It was a thirty-minute drive out to the prairie reserve, which was apparently the biggest one in the country. That always made me sad, it felt too small for that title. Still, the first sight of the wind rolling through the tallgrass is enough to make anyone weep—I certainly did. Even as a

child, it felt like seeing an incomparable display of bravery. We found a shorter grass area and flopped down. Light pollution was low in this part of the state, but the Flint Hills were especially clear, and on some nights you could see those cloudy bands of gas way out in space.

To break the ice, I said,

“Y’know this used to be an ocean?”

“Yeah, you and Dad used to smash open rocks like all the time. You found that snail that one time.”

“...”

“It was a trilobite.”

The sky had a certain intoxicating effect, kind of like a campfire without the warmth or the brightness. It was less comforting, but more hypnotic. The moisture and length of the grass made it pillowy and less cold than the air, and even with the looming threat of chigger bites, it beat the hell out of Econo Lodge. After a few minutes of idle stargazing, I asked,

“Y’know some people say they’ve seen the ghosts of plesiosaurs out here, swimming through the sky.”

“We have three generations buried in that graveyard with Grandma and Grandpa, and now we can’t even go back without paying for somewhere to stay.”

Taken aback, I could only muster a “what?”

“Why did we leave? Why did everyone leave? Why did you leave?”

“Uh, Mom and Dad supported it. I got that big scholarship in Chicago and—”

“You took it why? For a better paying job?”

“I mean, I suppose that—”

“Do you even care about the money?”

“...”

“I thought that’s what Mom and Dad wanted me to do.”

She replied, “Yeah, me too, and now everyone is fucking gone. Everywhere I go is unfamiliar. I’m locked into a job I hate and I can’t get out until I pay my college debt. I have no home anymore.”

Some time passed, and she said, “God, I just wanted to work in the library. But that’s not what the kids with the good grades ever did. And you, you wanted to be a dinosaur scientist. God, I fucked up.”

Trying to be funny, I retorted, “It’s called a paleontologist.”

I didn’t realize she was crying, or I would not have made that joke. It was a bad joke anyway.

Furthermore, she was right. Mom and Dad didn’t have college degrees, but we always had enough. We had enough for Thanksgiving meals, fireworks, high school baseball, a Wii, and a couple shitbox Toyotas for the two of us when we got to driving age. I was 17 when I got the letter in the mail from the big university up north, and I made a bad, naïve decision. In many ways, I’m still just 17. I want to see

my Mom and my Dad and my sister. I want to eat at Thanksgiving and shoot fireworks with them. I want to comb the exposed limestone for crinoids and trilobites and mosasaurs. I want to drive my shitty Corolla to go see Grandma and Grandpa. Laying there in the prairie, I couldn't help but feel that I had made the wrong call.

Now we're both crying. Our tears fell and blended into the already damp prairie grass, and through our wet eyes the cosmic clouds and stars joined together like black and white watercolor. Some of them looked like plesiosaurs.

