

We Will Elevate (Part One)

by Landon Beadle

As a kid, I never imagined that my death would come at the base of a massive presidential shrine.

Well, at least not *often*.

But as we ascended Hwy 16 towards Mt Rushmore at breakneck speeds, fighting against some imagined throng of Labor Day-crazed tourists, it really didn't seem as implausible as one might imagine. With every twist in the road I could foresee finding that frictional limit--that point where the tires would squeal and the car would become airborne for an instant, only to fall back to the ground in a mess of collapsing metal, shattering glass and frames that finally chose to rebel against their makers, fully aware that their poor, compatriot *Crash Test Dummies* were safely packed away elsewhere. The car would twist, contort and implode as much as it could before screeching to a halt wrapped around a *Cosmos Mystery Area* sign or, perhaps, in front of hole seven for one of the half dozen mini-golf resort areas we had passed.

I wasn't sure if I should feel more or less concerned; In the back, I felt I had the front seats and the bodies of both my accompanying relatives there to buffer me from harm. On the other hand, I felt a little concern that not only did I not have an airbag, but I was also stuck in the middle of the seats, with nothing but windshield directly in front of me. Also not helping me feel at ease was the ever-present *bag of knives* at the base of my feet. Most unnerving: I really didn't want a wad of cat shit to fall on my head if the car did go vertical.

An explanation: The past twenty-four hours had been spent travelling westward. My Dad was with me, as was his Aunt Kathy and her two cats, who weren't terribly fond of travel. In fact, three years earlier Kathy and I had made this 2200-mile voyage *twice*. The first time the cats bitched and complained and vomited and defecated freely. Once we learned that removing them from their cat carriers put them at ease, the journey went a bit smoother. I mean, I

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still reeked of cat ass by the end of each trip, but it wasn't as bad as it could've been.

For this trip my Father was along, and it was much more the chance to drive cross country as an adult with him than it was the thin pretext of helping my aunt drive back to her Palo Alto, CA home from her WI-based summer digs that spurred me along. I had spent the previous week moving and a previous morning unpacking frantically so that I could repack for the trip. We had left that following morning at 6am, driving an hour's drive North to meet outside of a BP in Portage, WI. Hugs were exchanged, coffee was purchased, and we were off. It was a solid eleven hours of driving to get us up to Rapid City, our vehicle feeling more like a misguided missile as we tore through the badlands and past the infamous *Wal-Drug* at speeds of up to 90mph. I was repeatedly chided by signs that made it clear that South Dakota was meat-territory, and that an animal-friendly vegetarian like myself had no business stopping to dine. Indeed, when we stopped at *Sanford's Grub & Pub* they had well over sixty menu items, but less than 10% of those that were meat-free. "*Hunt, Fish, Trap, Game! we say,*" they said.

The next morning we caffeinated and made our way towards *Mount Rushmore*. Kathy was driving. Kathy was over Seventy. And over Seventy, driving. She insisted on kicking it off, telling us that we were to be active observers, checking out the beauty that was South Dakota. She also said that we needed time to wake up in the morning. But, slumped forward in her seat to peer over the steering wheel, dark sunglasses with massive rims that pressed tightly against her forehead, threatening to leave outlines that would not fade, she was not a sight that screamed *it's okay--catch some shut-eye*. Quite the opposite, as she tried to balance her coffee in one hand and stop the cat in her lap from leaping down by her feet, swerving around a corner at 70mph...I felt the coffee in *my* hand was, perhaps, *unnecessary*.

I nervously shot glances behind us as she would inevitably swerve into the adjoining lane rather than slow her ascent, only to swerve back over on the straightaway. I lost feeling in my right hand

as I gripped the door handle next to me. I tried to keep my over-active mind satiated by reading the passing signs. It was also not a comfort when I realized that Kathy was doing the same, taking her eyes completely off the road to deliver unto us the history of Black Hills Gold or, sometimes, to express her concern that Labor Day must bring out the worst drivers, as each of them managed to accidentally depress their horn as they hurtled past us (or swerved away).

After a few more assaults on my nerves we arrived at Mount Rushmore. The girl in the check-in booth looked as satisfied with her lot in life as she was pleased to see us before their opening hours. She informed Aunt K that her "Golden Ticket" wouldn't bypass the parking fee, so we paid up and found a spot in the *Lincoln Lot*. Mount Rushmore is one of those things that I feel I should see sometime, but didn't feel an enormous amount of pressure to make it happen. This was justified, I feel. We saw Mountain Goat, and that was interesting. Mount Rushmore was cool to look at for a few moments, but it wasn't quite as polished as I had expected and not nearly as big. Once the crowds started arriving we had had our fill, and we hit the road again.

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"That's the sort of thing Marge would never agree to try," says my dad, as I refill my coffee. It's less than an hour after hurtling back down the mountain and my aunt has just finished an *IQ-Test* provided for us at our table. We're at a diner in Keystone, at the base of Rushmore. It's a one-road tourist trap. There are several knick-knack stores, a few jewelers, restaurants and motels. The IQ-Test set in front of us is a triangle with several holes for pegs. The game is to piggy-back one over another to each empty hole, the ultimate goal to have one peg remaining at the end of the day. Marge is my Grandmother on my Mother's side, who has in recent months taken residence in my parent's house.

"She must fear looking weak," adds Speed Rac--adds Kathy, having just finished the puzzle in two goes. I slide it my direction and start picking out the pegs, which coat my fingers with what appears to be sugar. It seems someone has dumped a packet into the game.

My dad agrees, "For sure. She won't even respond to any sort of riddle or challenge."

I end my first run with three pegs. Damn it. I vaguely register Kathy continuing Marge's evaluation, and I start the puzzle again. Two pegs are left at the end of round two. The waiter shows up with my toast and hashbrowns. On my third try I hit one peg.

"I did it in two," Kathy adds, swallowing a mouthful of eggs.

"So, what's the plan?" I ask. "Which route are we taking from here?"

I really want to know if we're heading South towards Cheyenne or back up to I-90. I've been pushing my agenda of skirting Deadwood since well before the trip began. I avidly watched the HBO series months back and am jonesing for a lawless fix.

"If we stay on alternate-16, it'll loop back to regular-16 into Wyoming and take us back to I-90," my dad says.

"We're not going back up through Rapid City? Because that'd be a huge detour." He shakes his head *no*. "But isn't it also a huge detour to go up North and loop back around South to get onto Hwy 16 down there?"

"No," he says. "We just stay on this highway."

I press on. "Wouldn't it make more sense to just take 385 from here, back up to I-90?"

"No," says Kathy. "Hwy 16 is the way to take."

I resign from the topic and focus on my hashbrowns. For a bit. We talk about the Crazyhorse monument they're carving, which is shooting to be the largest freestanding sculpture in the world. After a few minutes, I pretend to look at the atlas some more. "Look," I say. "16 loops back South and then we have to go North to get to the Highway. Isn't that backwards? Wouldn't it be much faster to get on the interstate quicker?"

Dad looks. "No--it's about the same distance. This area you're looking at isn't that big, we're not travelling out of our way."

"But," I say, "we've got to get onto I-90 at some point anyway. Is there any real reason to go that way instead of this way?"

"It is about the same distance," Dad concedes.

"We need to head West," says Kathy. "16 is the way you're supposed to take from here, we don't want to backtrack towards Rapid City."

"Well, it's not really backtracking..."

I jump in with my final attempt. "Look--as far as I can tell, there is no discernible difference between these two routes other than I have a vested interest in one over the other. Neither of you care the slightest bit about Hwy 16. There's nothing of note along the way. How is it possibly going to hurt to let me have this?"

They shrug agreements and the bill arrives. My dad looks down at the *IQ Test* puzzle, which has been placed in front of him. "You both solved this?" he asks. We nod. "Then I'm not trying it."

"What?" I ask, incredulous. "Kathy solved it in two tries, I solved it in three. It's not that rough."

"Right. what if I can't do it? Too much pressure!"

Aunt Kathy laughs. "You are a total chicken, John, and I'll never let you forget it."

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We've just passed the Church of Scientology, in downtown San Francisco. Nobody remarks on this. We're not crazy people.

The trolley behind us might fight us on that point. We've already circled the Transamerica Pyramid three times, with Kathy making sure to stay in the "BUS ONLY" lane with each pass. Maybe we are a bus, but I doubt it. Thick, steel cables are erected above us, stretching the length of the street and criss-crossing in bizarres patterns that lead me to wonder how the trolley's don't get caught in a mess of tangled wires.

Someone honks. We no longer notice.

"I'm on Montgomery and State," a voice tells me over the phone. We're trying to meet up with my cousin David, a newfound CA resident who has just ferried over from Mare Island in Vallejo. I relay this to the others.

"No left turn," shouts Dad. "No left turns anywhere!" He turns back to me. "Why is he there and not here? Tell him to come this way."

I tell him. "Where is 'this way'?" he asks.

"Where is this way?"

"By the big pyramid. Why is he not--tell him to walk four blocks east."

"Walk four blocks--"

"Run."

"Run four blocks east," I correct.

"There's no left turns! Why can we not go left?" My dad is like a deranged Seinfeld.

David runs four blocks and manages to sprint to our car while we're stuck in traffic. My dad spends the time leading up to this reflecting on better days, when he could rap my cousin on the head for irritating him. "Now he'll just rap me back!" he cries.

Before Picking up David we had stopped by Japantown. Japantown is just like the real Japan, only with 45% less tentacles. We had followed Geary from the Cliff House all the way to the Japan Center, only to find the beginning of our *Left Turn Blues*. At the Cliff House we had wandered around inside awkwardly, only to discover that every floor is also a restaurant. We hung outside by the ocean, watching surfers in the distance, who in turn were watching the ocean much closer than we were. They'd wait for a few wave cycles before intuitively paddling out to meet an as-yet-invisible wave, pivoting once they reached it to frantically paddle in an effort to match speed and direction. Once they did so they would hop to their feet and play Jesus. Only, Jesus didn't fall into the water after busting a few tricks, I don't think.

After a few right turns to compensate for our unexpected *ambiturner* status, we made our way to Japantown and parked.

Japantown is essentially a collection of Japanese-oriented malls. Whereas Chinatown is to some degree a haven for Chinese culture and language, Japantown is more a place for Japanophiles to drop their jaws. And my jaw was dropped, slightly.

I perused shops of Sake Carrafas and Pocky. Hello Kitty was out in great abundance, and there were several places to pick up 'authentic' kimono robes and wooden shoes. I found a store that sold imported Japanese video games and was disappointed to see that they only had titles that had already found an American niche.

"Excuse me."

A clerk stopped and looked my way.

"These are imported?"

"Hai." Very Japanese.

"Do you have the second *Osu Tatake Ouendan* release?"

Silence.

"...for the DS?" I add.

"We have *Bleach*," he says, pointing to a \$60 fighting game import, "and *Naruto*."

"Awesome."

I walk out of the store, disappointed. In the end I grab two purses, for my sister and also one for the girlfriend. I grab a box of rice candy, not really sure who will be receiving it but aware that it makes a nice souvenir. I ogle some wooden practice swords a store is selling for \$10 a pop before conceding that it'd be a difficult item to get onto the plane when we fly back home. At this point David calls to let us know that he is at the Ferry Building and going to head a few blocks away.

After successfully rendezvousing with David, he updates us on school and moving out the California way. David is just a few months older than me and was one of my closer relatives growing up. His family lived in Syracuse, so we only saw them once a year or so. He had actually just visited on a WI pitstop when he drove from New York to California, moving for Med School and putting our 2200-mile journey to shame. He explains how he and one of his female roommates are both ENFP's--or some such nonsense--which is

apparently very exciting. I'd feel out of the loop but I just remind myself that this is the kid who introduced me to *Magic: The Gathering* and I'm instantly less interested.

We head to Ghirardelli Square. I haven't eaten anything save a piece of toast 8-9 hours earlier, so I push for grabbing some grub. My dad wants to check out *Lois's* (which he keeps pronouncing as *Loris's*), which seems to be a 50's-diner-esque burger joint. I'm angling for the fact that it's our last night before flying back home, so when my aunt suggests *McCormick's* for drinks, I say let's eat.

After settling down at a table and talking hops with the bartender (more or less to compensate for my Aunt talking Wine Shop), I realize that I'm a bit out of my element. I do eat Seafood, but I have no idea how to order it. I eat some fish, but I can get picky on it and I don't like the idea of being able to recognize my food. I settle for crab & shrimp cakes, which seem to be priced more for the decorative element than the actual content of the food. My aunt gets a "salad" or, rather, a head of lettuce cut in half and sprinkled with dressing and bacon.

Don't get me wrong--the food's good. The food's *too* good, actually. I'm not accustomed to places like this. *McCormick's* is where my Aunt took me three years ago. She's a big fan of the Ghirardelli Square action. The view is magnificent; The bay is stretched out before us, the sun is setting and Alcatraz Island lies in the backdrop. I eat my food, drink my beer, and accept some seared tuna from Kathy. She seems to be testing us a bit, and when I reject an offering of ginger I feel I'm losing some sort of undefined battle of wills. I've had ginger--I enjoy ginger, I just don't care for it on its own. With Sushi, sure, but with Crab Cakes? I backpedal and try some.

After declining desert and letting Aunt Kathy pick up the tab, we hit Ghirardelli for some chocolate. I get a waffle cone and the girl compliments me on my name, which happens from time to time. Because I'm awesome. And pretending not to notice that my receipt says 'Lennon', I head to watch some Chocolate being made and wait for my ice cream, which immediately drips all over my white shirt.

Because I'm awesome.

We cruise art galleries and mock some tourists. We are so *hip*. There's a Warhol exhibit. Kathy is excited about a doodler, a doodler doodling doodles that look familiar.

"Did that guy do a lot of stuff for the *New Yorker*?" I ask.

My aunt nods. I thought so. I thought it looked familiar. We browse his exhibit and I pretend not to notice the blurb on his 50 year collaboration with *Playboy*. After two galleries and a few manic bathroom hunts, we hang outside on the street and try not to obviously watch the drunks. At first thought I believed myself to be avoiding eye contact with homeless people, but soon realized it was just a guy in baggy clothes who was *tanked*. He shouts to someone across the street to make sure *they* know how blitzed he is. I buy some cheap souvenirs--a coffee mug and a snowglobe--figuring that I should return with trinkets for the woman.

The snow globe cracks in my luggage courtesy airport staff (or physics). The coffee mug stays intact.

Kind of.

Two nights later, back in the odd comfort of my new apartment, I present both items to Kate. I feel bad about the snowglobe, which hasn't completely broken but *leaks* a little nonetheless. She likes the coffee mug, which is vibrant, purple and I think it captures a San Franciscan Sunset better than a \$6.99 cup should. She frowns for a moment, and says "I think this is meant to just be a decorative thing."

"Why?"

She hands the mug back to me, pointing out a sticker that proclaims *This item WILL expose you to lead and cadmium, two elements known to cause birth defect and miscarriage in the state of California.*

"So?" I shrug. "It's two presents in one."

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