

## Just Enough Truth for Christmastime

*Todd Morley*

IN A COUPLE OF WEEKS, I'll pack up my truck and with my roommate head for Utah. We'll be there the week before Christmas, skiing and visiting friends and family. We both bought new skis for the occasion, long white racers with matching bindings.

When I first looked at the skis, I was surprised to see they had no grooves in their waxy P-tex bottoms. I had learned as a child that grooves made skis stable. Now I imagined myself careening wildly down the side of a mountain, gradually shedding my equipment and clothing, uttering unmentionables in both English and Spanish—all because some negligent designer had forgotten to mold a shallow indentation into his prototypes. Then I realized the vision of catastrophe was not a vision at all. It was a memory, an inchoate recollection of one of my more spectacular wipeouts. My skis had had grooves in them, but they didn't keep me standing. I was too good at catching an edge.

The salesman had laughed. Grooves had been out for years; if a ski needed one nowadays, it was poorly designed and you ought to avoid buying it. This convinced me enough to get the new skis, but I've thought about taking the old ones along, just in case I want to have a good fall.

But, I wasn't going to talk about skis. The fact that the old skis have grooves and the new ones don't might suggest a critique of my generation's relativism, but my memory of the wipeout screws up the analogy. I was going to talk about the trip. You see, it's really the traveling I'm looking forward to.

Driving between Utah and California has always been a sort of pilgrimage for me. I was born in Salt Lake City. Soon after that, my folks finished college and moved to Los Angeles. Later we moved to

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Mountain View and then to Palo Alto, so I consider myself a Californian. But each year between Thanksgiving and Christmas, I get a little stiff in the joints. I usually recognize the ache straight off as an urge to be in Utah—which is misleading, because it's never taken very much Utah to make me want to come back home. It's the trip.

A few days after I notice the ache, I begin questioning it. Why do you want to go to Utah? You always get bored and become overly sensitive about the cosmopolitan breeding you imagine yourself having. The people are never as exciting as you think they'll be. Why go to Utah? But the ache remains. I have to follow the line of thought through an entire imaginary trip, beginning to end, to remember why I need to go skiing in Utah this Christmas.

When I was a child, Mom and Dad made a foam pad for the back of our first Volvo station wagon. We called it "The Mattress." We put it in the car whenever the family drove to Utah. The mattress lasted longer than the car; it also fit our second wagon, a classic mustard-yellow Volvo with boxy lines and dual carbs. The kids wrestled, ate, sang, changed into and out of PJs, and slept on the thing, through all sixteen hours of Interstate 80.

Mom and Dad took turns driving. The one resting read out loud from *Where the Red Fern Grows*, led songs, and disciplined the kids. It exasperated Dad that we were capable of so much chaos; Mom, that we could disobey with such virtuosity. We exasperated them by bugging each other. Craig and I worried our sisters with a variety of clever psychological techniques, all heavy on deniability. Authority was the girls' main weapon. "Craig, burp in Deborah's ear." "Mom, Craig's burping in my ear." "Todd told me to." "I did not; I was way back here, looking at the stars." It was a regular pageant, more entertaining than the family musical productions Mom always hoped she could pull off during the holidays.

I did look at the stars. The Volvo's rear end was designed with stargazing in mind. The window had a high vertical profile, allowing me to see nearly half the sky through the clear, thin nocturnal desert air.

Dad claims he cannot recall doing any of the drive at night. Then it was a tactical maneuver, designed to maximize the travel hours in which the kids were asleep and hence silent. It has since become a "foolish" policy, less because more accidents occur at night—which is true, and which adds to the *mystique*—than because it keeps the parents of college students awake in their beds worrying about the storm going through the pass—which is false, because, as enlightened college students will repeatedly emphasize to their parents, the parents *choose* to stay awake.

I also learned to recognize landmarks: a junk sculpture, a KOA

campground, valentines and initials painted on the sides of rocks, the humming mining operations, and the Bonneville Speedway turnpike. The speedway was a source of endless questions directed to Dad. How fast did the cars go? How could they go that fast? Did you ever drive your hot rods on the speedway? Why don't the rocket cars sink in the mud like we would if we drove off the side of the road? The speedway was only a couple of miles past the State Line Casino, but I had to concentrate to see it coming in the dark.

The length and monotony of the experience made driving to Utah an ad-hoc EST session: pseudo-togetherness and surface issues from Mountain View to Berkeley, open attacks to Reno, chaos in the desert, and bonding just before the Great Salt Lake. It was a perfect setup. The highway wore us all down. The confinement created an unbearable sensory intensity; after Sacramento, we could tell each other by the smell of our sweat. Mom's musical sensibilities would grow particularly acute, until they exhausted her. Whoever hadn't been doing their practicing got it for singing off-key or missing their entrance in "White Coral Bells." Mom knew lots of songs, but Dad could only take so many of the kids' embellishments. And reading out loud got hard on the voice. So my parents withdrew. Unless we stopped at the vista point to get some air, Donner Lake was just a momentary blue ripple under the Michelins. The overload drove my parents out of their senses and into themselves, where they found Utah and history and family.

It was then my parents would tell us about our past. We could tell by the glazed monotony of their voices that they had entered a sort of travelers' trance. They would barely notice us even if we tried to aggravate them, so it wasn't worth trying. Gradually we discovered that we didn't want to interrupt them anyway: their stories gave us ideas for some of our best pranks, told us how we could expect different relatives to treat us, and helped us anticipate or avoid sensitive moments in Utah. Dad's boisterous tales of watermelon wars inspired our snowball fights with neighbor kids at Grandma and Grandpa Morley's house. Mom's ironic quips about her mother's distaste for cooking warned us to locate the nearest convenience store as we approached her home. Their arguments about Grandpa's cigarettes and coffee suggested that we avoid the kitchen when we heard Grandpa's earthy voice responding to Grandma at the breakfast table. Asking the wrong questions might put Mom and Dad in a bad mood; and if they felt good, we might get to go hooky-bobbing\* on the Volvo later. These stories were

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\*Hooky-bobbing was popular winter mischief among Dad's peers. According to his stories, they crouched behind a parked car, waiting for a passing vehicle (buses were favorite targets) to grab its rear bumper as it passed. They slid on their feet over

an asset to negotiate for. They gave us ourselves. saw leaves and branches pinned by the snow against the windows. It was the second station wagon, still pretty new. We saw Dad was angry, so we kept quiet. We watched him get out of the car, ask some passersby to call a towing rig, and eventually dig the car out of the snow. Mom somberly led us in a series of family prayers. By the time Dad finished digging out the car, each of us had at least one chance to pray. (I prayed twice; being the oldest, it was my privilege to pray first.) The prayers must have worked, because the car did. When we were back on the highway, Mom and Dad argued the relative efficacies of prayer and tow chains. I sided with prayer, but I knew Craig sided with the chains, because he peeked at the tow truck while he was saying his prayer. I don't think Mom saw. Nobody told.

Family prayers were the most obvious travel ritual, but my favorite was dinner at truck-stop cafes. I learned from my dad to love these cafes, even before I remember eating at them. (I admired his calling them "greasy spoons," discovering only years later that the metaphor was not his invention.) After a hard Saturday of yard work, Dad would take us to the Peninsula Creamery fountain for a milkshake, sometimes for a whole meal. I always ordered a chocolate shake—with a barbecue-beef sandwich, when I could get away with it. When we ate at the fountain, Mom got upset, because Dad never told her beforehand. She'd cook us a fine dinner, assuming a proper Saturday appetite and wanting inclusion in part of the day's labor ritual. We would return from the creamery content and convivial. I think Dad didn't want to tell her. He wanted this to be a secret among the men, one that favored us over the women—like getting donuts at Winchell's before priesthood meeting on Sunday mornings, which Mom said was breaking the Sabbath. Dad wanted us on his side. Mom knew in her heart that excluding her from our togetherness was the real sin; that is why she worked so hard to keep us out of the Winchell's clique at Sunday school. (It didn't work.) Dad had the fountain; Mom had God.

The rest of the kids favored McDonald's. I thought this was far too conventional, so I'd start lobbying early for a particular casino in Elko. It had a large, smoky dining room on the corner of Main and something. If we got there late enough at night, two waitresses would be on duty, one in her late teens or twenties, and one in her late fifties or sixties. Girly or Grandma, take your pick. The psychology worked on

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the ice and snow, wherever their hosts carried them. Dad wisely compromised, in our case, by allowing us to hooky-bob on the Volvo.

me. I always hoped the older waitress would serve us, so I could hear her call me “sonny” or praise my blond hair. This was a ritual loaded with misogyny, but I took attention anywhere I could get it. McDonald’s couldn’t compete.

I liked the food. When my campaigning was successful, the reward was a hot roast-beef sandwich, which was really a piece of substanceless white bread cut diagonally, with sliced beef, whipped reconstituted potatoes, and brown gravy over the whole plate. Sometimes there would be beans taken from a green #10 S&W can on the stainless steel counter in the kitchen. The beans were good with gravy too. The large glass of milk I ordered with the sandwich always came minutes before the plate, and lukewarm. I inspected the glass after the meal to make sure a proper ring of cream appeared below the rim. We drank two percent at home.

And there were the mysterious vending machines in the bathrooms. When I stared at the machines, it puzzled me that my mother faithfully sent us into this room to wash our hands before dinner. Mom had no way of knowing that, in part, I pulled for the older waitress as an act of penitence.

The Utah ache drove me back for college. My roommates flew home at Thanksgiving and Christmas, but I never grudged them the flight. I drove eagerly, alone, straight through, any chance I got. These were sacred hours, a silence for spending pocket change on candy and scarce ten-dollar bills on gasoline. There was always time to pull over at the Bonneville Speedway and the junk sculpture. I’d coast to a stop, leave the motor running to keep the heater on, and close the door behind me. Then I’d stand motionless and reverent in front of these highway ornaments, letting memories return in full force, knowing I could stand there as long as I wanted. The winter wind seemed to have its own pair of hands, gripping but benevolent. Often they herded into the black desert night all of the scapegoats I cared to release into their custody.

I sometimes felt there should have been Christmas lights hanging on the landmarks. Each stop was a freedom I gave myself. Each curbside rite at these personal shrines was a tiny renewal blinking on a long wire that connected Ogden and Spring City to Glendale and Palo Alto. Somehow I knew I had to give myself these private gifts before returning home for the holidays. These gifts gave me something to bring back to my family. They still do.

Mom and Dad started splitting the sheets before I went to college, but I still get the ache every December. I’ve got to go back, even though I have no taxes to pay there. I already know where I’ll eat dinner. I could just drive to the cafe and back, but that would only

allow for one meal. Besides, now that I drive a four-wheeler, I've half a mind to test the mud beyond the shoulder of Highway 80 at Bonneville. And each time I drive all the way to Utah, I cut a slender groove into the asphalt on the cold desert floor. Maybe it will still be there when my son makes the drive.

