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So Far, So Good

Ralph Salisbury

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SO FAR, SO GOOD

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*So Far,
So Good*

RALPH SALISBURY

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Set in Minion by Laura Wellington.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

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*To my wife and fellow writer,
Ingrid Wendt; to Jeff, Brian, and
Martina, my children; and to
Connor, Travis, Gemma, and
Gavino, my grandchildren.*

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PROLOGUE

Bullet-shattered glass clattering onto my baby bed, I awake and cry, into darkness, for help.

Do I remember this? Or do I remember being told? I will feel it, whichever it is. I will feel it, chill bomb-bay wind buffeting my eighteen-year-old body, a mile above an old volcano's jagged debris; feel it, seeing photos of Jewish concentration camp children, huddled together for warmth, photos of Korean orphans, huddled together, homeless in blizzard after American bombing — bombing in which, twenty-five, I had refused an order to join.

Ma snatches my blanket-swaddled body up, to shield me against whatever might come next, and glass shards pierce her arms. Pa lunges out into the night, gripping a pistol, with which he'd once wounded an armed robber and had too many times drunkenly terrorized his own family.

Pa, alert to shoot whoever is attacking our home, finds only snow — snow a mass killer that will, scientists tell us, bury the last child to be born on earth.

Targeting a farmhouse window would be a “drive-by shooting” in today's news — news meant to arouse fear — fear, which seems to sell medications, deodorants, conformist designer clothes, manipulative political candidates, and an economically disastrous, bad-for-everyone's-physical-and-mental-health, materialistic, militaristic imperialism.

Bombs exploding, hundreds of babies cremated alive—what did my experience of the world's violence amount to really? A racially motivated harassment? A neighborhood grudge? Or, maybe, a drunken young stranger saw our dimly lighted farmhouse windows as an opportunity to outdo pals, who'd shot holes into road signs, meant to keep people from being lost or from losing their lives on dangerous curves.

A drive-by shooting—a mystery.

A drive-on shooting—not mystery but history: Giddyap, oxen, mule, horse—and drive, drive, drive on, to the last acre of free-for-the-taking land—on, on, on, to extermination of the last of the Mohicans—of tribe after tribe after tribe.

A ride-by shooting—motivation: an Easterner's urge to imitate fictional Wild West heroes, by aiming out of a train window and killing a buffalo or an Indian.

I think of my brother Bob's telling me that another American soldier shot an Arab off his horse, in Algeria, during World War II, just for the hell of it.

In this rambling, free-associational placement of electronic impulse on screen, ink on page, there will be some accounts of terror and death. Few compared to those on TV news but more than I, or you, might wish.

A survivor of one lightning strike, some car and plane mishaps, some explosions, a few bullets, a heart attack, cancer, and other human afflictions, I ask myself, as readers may well be asking, why should anyone read this?

Maybe for warnings implicit in my confessed mistakes. Maybe for what little wisdom my many years have bestowed. Maybe for the story of someone who grew up without indoor plumbing or electricity and worked—despite hunger—in often above 100-degree

heat and often 30-below-zero cold, from lantern-lit predawn to lantern-lit late night, on a Mississippi River Valley farm, beside a narrow, dusty, muddy, or snow-choked dirt wagon trail, which had become an auto road.

If you had walked that road with me from my fourth through my eleventh years—stamping with one booted heel, maybe, to crack yesterday’s footprint’s ice into zig-zag lightning—you would have found yourself in a one-room school’s smells of chalk dust, glue, and the seldom bathed bodies of children.

If you had joined me in visiting my father’s mother, you would have hiked several miles along a creek, on a generations-worn footpath, until you reached the small hill farm, to which our out-gunned and outnumbered Cherokee-Shawnee forebears had fled, abandoning rich valley plantations to murderous, government-sanctioned mobs.

Someone who hunted first with bow and arrow and then, starting at age twelve, with rifle and shotgun, and helped to keep his family alive, I might belong in a museum, among stuffed animals, but I have learned to use this computer, more complex than those with which I aimed the cannon and machine guns of a B-29 bomber—same type plane as the two that ended lives in Hiroshima and Nagasaki and changed all of our lives.

I was seventeen when I enlisted in what was then the army air corps. I was twenty when World War II ended, and I was twenty-five when I refused orders to join in the fire-bombing of North Korean cities and only escaped prison because a computer failed to extend my enlistment and sent my World War II honorable discharge the week before I was to be arrested. Seventy-five now, in a year when Muslim martyrs’ suicide attacks have destroyed the U.S. World Trade Center and much of the Pentagon and killed thousands, I have started this day, as I have started most days for most of my life, by trying to write.

Why?

Yesterday I would have given the honest answer Socrates was executed for giving to most questions worth asking, “I do not know.”

Today, my life—and the lives of all living things—soon to end, I do know why I am beginning to try to write a hop-skip-and-jumps-and-maybe-some-dancing memoir. My daughter, to whom I read or told stories nearly every night of her childhood, has asked me to put some of our family’s realities down, with no fictionalizing and no poeticizing, just things as they were. I am trying, although, for most of my life, I have depended on imagination as an astronaut depends on a heat shield, imagination protecting me from the painful realities I have needed to reenter.

Free association, spontaneity, a wholeness of the moment, a union of past and present, of childhood and after—these are what I seek, and the result may be as random and unorganized as my bank account and my life. Whether or not I live to finish and publish this manuscript, here are some memories of a poverty-stricken, malnourished, sometimes nearly fatally ill, and mostly mysteriously happy child, memories of a mixed-race, somewhat educated world citizen. And memories of an individual seeking what seems to be best for himself, for his loved ones, and for other individuals.

Whatever is here I offer to the world, knowing that my life is but one of a multitude of lives, all doomed to undergo change and, I believe, to go on and on, in the Great Plan, which, perhaps, we humans can, in our best moments, somewhat sense.

1

It is January 24, 1926, and the third child of an Irish American mother and an English-Cherokee-Shawnee father has killed his mother and himself.

That would have been my life's story had not my father, the son of a Cherokee medicine man, left his suffering wife in her sister's care, harnessed horse to sled, and braved blizzard winds in search of a university-trained doctor.

The sled runners pass swiftly over ice-crusting snow, until what seems to be just another drift proves to be a hidden rock — one of the many dropped, like a sleepy child's toys, when a glacier slipped back into its hibernation dream after failing to reach the equator.

Thrown from Dad's sled, the doctor has to tape his own cracked ribs before sleighing on to save my mother from being killed by her twisted-around-backward baby and saves me from hanging myself with the cord that had been, for nine months, a lifeline.

Eight and a half pounds of centuries of Native American-European mating happenstance are yanked into the world, dangled head down, and whacked on the butt. This first of a lifetime of blows inspires the first of a lifetime of protests, a lung-clearing squall.

Maybe my books are self-administered, lung-clearing, mind-clearing shocks — WHACK!

On 1929 newspapers' picture pages lords of commerce were attempting wingless flight from skyscrapers, whose heights mocked cathedrals' centuries of pitiful attempts to reach Heaven.

Money had been squandered to buy guns and ammunition and explosives and poison gas. The stock markets of the world had collapsed, and millions, including my three-year-old self, were hungry, too hungry to fight off disease. Fever burned into my brain the dark shape of our huge barn teetering on my little thumb. My gasping breath told a doctor to tell my worried parents that I would probably not live to blow out four birthday candles—which wouldn't be there in any case, because there was little flour for bread, none for cake.

Dad drove his Model T Ford through a blizzard. When he returned, he held, in his numbed hands, ice cream, which he'd sacrificed badly needed food money to buy. Ice cream was something he'd never had in his hard childhood. A younger brother's taking the risk of catching scarlet fever to offer a bit of boiled potato was a precious early memory.

From Mom's story my ravenous ears received again and again the gift that Dad had risked his life on icy roads to bring. I was too sick to eat, but the ice cream melts, now, on my storytelling tongue, and it will melt again and again and again in the ears of my children and grandchildren, though tv hypnotically sounds and shows the glory of slim actors' salty, grease-flavored, fast-food gluttony and the joys of school cafeteria food fights.

During a visit to my family's farm this year, 2001, I discovered that my sister, Ruth, had bought an electric range and a microwave to replace the wood-burning stove. When we were children, Ruth, my brothers Ray and Rex, and I all took pride in carrying the kindling, with which our mother's cooking fires were started. Our half brother, Bob, was big enough to chop or saw wind-felled maple limbs into chunks short enough to fit into the stove. We children knew that we had to work to stay alive. Winter was not a movie monster, against which well-groomed men and women gracefully struggled on camera. Winter froze the birds cats hunted

and froze any cats that ventured too far from the barn, which was heated by the big bodies of horses and cows. Winter was cruel, but it also kept meat from spoiling. It supplied ammunition for snowball wars. It provided snow for igloos and for Eskimo statues, as pale as polar bears.

I remember my pride in cradling more and more, heavier and heavier, stacks of kindling in my arms, then carrying the load to the kitchen porch, where, stamping snow from rubber boots, I'd wait until Ma opened the door, took the wood, and praised me. Praise was important, and so was the reward of standing by the stove, chilled fingers tingling as they thawed. Fire, its heat greater than that exuded by thousands of horses and cows, cooked the potatoes Ma and Aunt Jennie had planted and harvested and piled in a wooden bin in our dark, rat-infested cellar. Fire cooked the rabbits, wild ducks, and pheasants Dad and big brother Bob hunted, after the last scraps of butchered hog were gone.

Fire kept us alive until the sun was warm again, but fire had burned my pet kittens in the blazing barn and burned men, women, and children to death in a war, in the newspaper, which my mother lit with a match, to ignite kindling to ignite chunks of wood.

From the black earth of my home rain would wash up white skulls and body bones of varmints, cats, dogs, and cows—whatever had been too humble to merit deep burial. Playing Indian pursued by cowboy, nostrils flared wide from running hard, I would sometimes scent the recently dead—from sickness, old age, or attack—slowly, too slowly, becoming bones, and I would run harder, over the centuries of life and the eons before life, which had become the dirt under my tingling feet. Rover, the big dog, on whose warmth I often pillowed my sleepy face, sometimes smelled of the corpses in which he'd wallowed.

Helping big brother Ray to scatter oats for chickens was one of my jobs, and sometimes, the brood hens off their nests, I'd see chickens' birth. It was nothing like my butt-first, reluctant, self-centered

entrance into life. Tiny beaks pecked windows into the shells of eggs. Then, windows widening to doors, out would come slimy, loathsome little morsels, which would dry and be cute yellow chicks.

Ducklings were also cute, but at age two or three I whacked fluffy little ducks with a stick and got whacked myself. I cannot remember my slaughter of the innocents or Dad's punishing me, but my killing the little ducks became a part of our family's nighttime storytelling. I can only guess what might have caused my rampage. A childish viciousness inspired by boredom? A tantrum because the little ducks wouldn't let me cuddle them as I cuddled little kittens? Primal human evil? Or making war against birth, which had brought a competitor, my baby sister, into the family? No way to know. At age sixteen, speeding to the beauty of a lake and the beauty of my girlfriend, I failed to see a duck waddling into the road, but I have not become a habitual killer of ducks and not a habitual killer of—excepting flies and mosquitoes—anything else. To protect my home, I fired a shotgun at humans, and, inspired by war-time propaganda, I volunteered to kill the evil enemies depicted in movies, but now killing others of my own species seems to me a horrible last resort, not, as some politicians seem to feel, an acceptable means for gaining wealth.

In school I learned the names of wars but not, as in Health Science, ways to prevent them. At home I learned to kill animals to keep from starving.

Each winter Dad would select a fat hog and shoot it between its bleary, terrified eyes. Then began the butchering, its start stabbing the fat throat and letting blood pour out into pigpen straw. Next came cleansing. The cookstove's north end was an enamel-lined reservoir, in which approximately three gallons of water were warmed for daily face washing and weekly baths, but to make sufficient water hot enough to scald the bodies of butchered pigs—so that bristles could be scraped from skin—an oblong five-gallon copper boiler was placed on top of the stove.

I vaguely remember helping to scrape pig bristles, and maybe I added a little weight and helped—or was allowed to feel that I had—in pulling on the rope to raise the dead pig high enough to be lowered into the scalding water. After scalding and scraping, the pig’s skin was as smooth as my own, and the steel tub, into which the pig’s intestines fell from its split body, was the same tub into which our family had to scrunch to take baths.

Seeing the pig split and its intestines slithering, like huge, glistening snakes, is a vivid memory, as are the two tales a salesman told Dad in my presence. One tale was of African tribesmen’s splitting a living human by tying his legs to two saplings, which had been pulled low by many men’s weight and then allowed to spring back up. The other tale was of a white American mob’s tying a black man’s legs to two wagons and whipping the horses to pull the wagons in opposite directions. I remember being paralyzed with horror, and I remember Dad’s speaking sharply to get me to leave and spare myself. Later I’d learn that Dad had seen a black man disemboweled by whites and had seen another black man tied to the bumper of a car and dragged until his body was as lifeless as his bloody clothes.

After butchering a pig, my family would eat the liver first, because it could be cooked quickly, and we would have been hungry for weeks. I remember judging little bites of meat so they would flavor the largest possible mouthful of potatoes or bread, to make my stomach less empty. I remember waking up early because I was hungry. I remember the weather’s getting colder and colder until, finally, it was cold enough so a hog could be butchered without the meat’s spoiling. I remember the good smell of frying liver and, then, the delicious taste.

Four circular plates in the top of the cookstove could be levered open so that a soot-blackened metal poker could level coals for even heating. Mother or Aunt Jennie would lift one of the circular plates, make a high blaze with a newspaper, and singe pinfeathers off plucked pheasants’ pitifully bare, shotgun-pellet-pierced flesh.

Sometimes, Mother or Aunt Jennie would open one of the circular stove covers and let us children hold slices of buttered bread over coals. With sugar frugally dusted onto melted butter, the smoke-tasting brown slices of thick homemade bread were one of my favorite treats—only excelled by the twisty, sticky, sweet cinnamon rolls, which mother sometimes made if she could afford to buy sugar and cinnamon. In wild raspberry season scraps trimmed from piecrusts and flavored by red jam were another treat.

My job on baking day was to take the measuring cup into the pantry and bring flour back to the kitchen. The flour was kept in a tall, maybe ten-gallon tin barrel, and I had to stand on a thick last year's catalog to reach inside. A story with a moral told that a child fell into a pioneer family's flour bin and smothered. At school a big boy told a story about a boy playing a trick on his parents by bringing white salt instead of white sugar, and I did this once, with no awareness that I was wasting our impoverished family's precious food.

Mother and Aunt Jennie worked hard to preserve vegetables for winter. Tomatoes, peas, and green beans were boiled and vacuum-sealed inside glass jars, which were then stored on shelves in our cellar, the cellar in which we huddled when storms threatened.

Once her family was in the basement, Ma extinguished our kerosene lantern, perhaps to conserve expensive fuel, perhaps to lessen the danger of fire should our house crash down on us. Huddled in darkness, we'd see lightning blazing through narrow cellar windows and flickering in glass jars crammed with food we'd eat after tornados had given way to blizzards.

Twice tornados twisted through our farm. Ironically, one tornado leaped over two old buildings Pa had intended to tear down. Then, the swirling cloud slammed into our new garage and dislodged it from its foundations. Next our huge corncrib collapsed onto a new, unused, and uninsured threshing machine, parked between sections of the crib.