

# The World of Silence

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Straddling a ridge-line like a child on a fence, the station looked north and south over a country that extended for miles over high desert plateaus and buttes and irregular contours of volcanic rock and earth. The late afternoon rains stopped, and the season changed. In early evening, winter in the air. At 6500 feet, spring and fall were ideas of people at lower elevations. In the morning, the muddy stage road would be frozen.

The next evening Old Man Buncell and the passengers off his mail stage had just sat down to supper when there was a knock at the door.

The Shoshone man stood in the doorway. He said good evening. "This is for the mail," he said, and handed Henry's mother a bundle of letters, postage attached, bound together with a strand of twine.

"I'll see that it goes out tomorrow," she said.

"Thank you." He turned to go. The wind blew in the leaves of the two black walnut trees in front of the station. Two cows and a horse stood in the shelter of the stone windbreak near the barn.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," she called after him. "I'm Ada Brown. There's a bunch of us Browns you'll meet soon enough."

"George Madison," he said, turning. "Good to meet you."

"You let us know if you need anything over there. Trouble with the electricity, plumbing."

George Madison smiled. Then he was walking off into the dark, towards the camp he and his family had made the day before. They had come in a wagon, had unloaded their gear and supplies and assembled the canvas-walled tent with cookstove across the creek from the station and below the rimrock to the west. Ada closed the door and turned back into the room. The normal din of supertime had stopped, replaced by listening, watching. The four men from off the stage. Henry. His father, Arthur. They were all watching her. Streaks of gray in her long black hair caught

the light of the lamp. "Boo," Ada said, and made her way past the long dining table to the chest of drawers where they kept outgoing mail.

The talk returned and one man, a salesman on his way to Boise, remarked, to no one in particular, to everyone gathered at the table, that these Indians were troublesome, had to be watched, were reverting to their aboriginal ways.

Ada was dishing up the soup. "Mister, these Indians can ride a bicycle. Can you ride a bicycle?"

The man looked up and down the table. "If they want to whoop it up on a bicycle, fine by me, but let 'em whoop it up on the reservation where they belong."

"You didn't answer my question," Ada said. Her arms were crossed. Though he was sitting, and she was standing, it was clear she was far taller than him. She was taller than most men, including her husband. The salesman's own smallness seemed to occur to him. He was distracted.

"What's that?"

"Can you ride a bicycle?"

The men at their soup. The darkness outside the tall windows, the glass reflecting the fire, orange and flickering.

"It takes balance to learn to ride a bicycle. Commitment. Have you any of those qualities?"

Henry watched his mother, unsurprised, but expectant. Arthur asked to have the bread passed, please. Ada returned to the kitchen.

After supper, the same man, spitting tobacco and sitting on a bench before the fire, remarked, more quietly, to Henry when Ada was out of earshot, "Don't let them scattering Indians' modern attire fool you. They're a shiftless lot, and they're not changing. And you should watch now. That buck's handsome. Watch now that you don't let the fox into the henhouse."

It did not seem strange to Henry that the Indians had a bicycle. At least no more strange than if he had a bicycle. It would not seem strange until years later, after he'd watched too many Westerns. There had never been a bicycle out at the station. No other roads passed through the country beside the stage road, and it was rocky and rutted and difficult in places even for the stage to navigate. That morning he'd finished his chores to find the Indian children riding the bicycle with their father down on the dried-up mudflats where the creek met the Wickahoney. The bicycle was

red and new. They rode forth and back, laughed and hollered in Shoshone, and sometimes quarrelled over whose turn it was to ride. The smallest one, the toddler, ran beside them, his strides choppy and awkward and at times his legs buckling like a newborn calf. He ran and ran. His legs could not reach the pedals. He rode on the handlebars with his father. Their mother appeared and called out to them, the Shoshone meaning nothing to Henry. But it was the noon hour; she was calling them to dinner, and Henry was called back to himself. He was standing beneath a tree at the edge of the orchard.

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At dusk or well past it, the freight wagons came into the station, pulled by six, eight or ten horse teams—sometimes a twelve or sixteen mule jerkline team pulled three linked wagons. Arthur and Henry met them at the barn, helped the teams out of their harnesses, fed and stabled them. The drovers—mud-covered, spent—they washed up, came inside, sat before the fire. They spoke of automobiles in Boise or Salt Lake, of trucks they drove in the war, of engines—imagine, engines—and oiled roads, of trolley cars and progress, the frontier closed, ancient history, and what the hell was they doing out here in this goddamn country anyway, a hundred miles from nowhere, Antarctica had better roads. Arthur listened and nodded and when they finished, he agreed, working up to the word "anachronistic," building up to it, establishing a context for their understanding, and despite this consideration, an exhausted man might still say, "What the hell kind of word is that?" And, "If a fellow can think up a word like, what was that?"

"Anachronistic."

"Right. If a fellow can come up with a word like that, he ought to be able to build a passable road through this godforsaken country."

Arthur was ready for this also.

"Now there's a word to linger on," Arthur said. "We have that expression, 'godforsaken,' but we consistently attribute it to the wrong places, to the places we have forsaken, to the places we have yet to drive God from."

If given the opportunity, Arthur might go on to describe how an anachronism was like an eddy pool in the river of time, with the surface of their lives flat and still and calm, bypassed by the rushing current.

Most men who drove freight liked talking to Henry's father; he was a good listener; he knew quite a lot about mechanics, about suspension and wheels and repair. He was a master wheelwright, self-taught, and there weren't many wheelwrights left anymore. He'd done repair jobs for most

all of them at some time or other. And they watched, and he shared with them what he knew. They didn't seem to mind when he used words like "torque" or "vector;" they could see what he was driving at. But if the conversation lasted long enough, Arthur more than likely slid into words like "metaphysics" and "modernity," phrases like "inner light" and "river of time." Arthur's preoccupations worked their way in, and his audience then lapsed into silence and looked off over the country or into the fire, and then Henry's father said, "But that's just a lot of rambling there, isn't it? Let's see if supper's on." Or, "How far are you headed tomorrow?"

Ada responded to such talk from Arthur in her predictable fashion.

If Arthur said, "landscape," Ada said, "No one in this country says, 'landscape.' People in this country say 'country.' They say, 'This morning, looking out over the country.' If you're ever going to cut it out here in the sagebrush, my dear husband, you've got to stop looking out over the landscape."

Other times, when Arthur's diction called attention to itself, Ada said, "How did this happen to me? I'm a Nevadan. Nevadans don't stand for such talk."

"You're a Nevadan living in exile," Henry reminded her.

"That's right, Henry. I'm a Nevadan in exile."

"A Basque Nevadan in exile," Henry added.

"A rare breed," Arthur said.

"A Basque Nevadan Quaker, in exile," Henry said.

"Surely the first of its kind," Arthur said.

Ada ignored them. "Your father dragged me across the border into Idaho. Why did I agree? I didn't have many options in Mountain City. I was desperate. I was getting old, my spinsterhood almost upon me. Quilting looked more and more attractive. Your father came along, and had all his teeth and clean ears. My height failed to scare him away."

"I lack the Napoleon complex," Arthur said.

"Yes," Ada said. "Another saving virtue. Your father saved me from spinsterhood and quilting, but then he brought me out here."

This explanation and its many variations, which Arthur called their "exodus story," were familiar performances the Brown family enacted for themselves or for others. Sparked by some remark of Arthur's and followed by Ada's comic antagonism, they each had their roles. Henry filled in gaps. Arthur appeared besieged, defiant. Ada embraced her victimhood.

"Now look at me," Ada said. "Am I any better off?"

"I am eccentric," Arthur said. "Your mother knew that from the beginning."

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When Arthur met passengers off the northbound stage, he introduced himself, welcomed them to Wickahoney Station, helped unload trunks and boxes, and said, "Inside, you'll meet my lovely wife, Ada. You may have heard about her already. She's Nevadan, and Nevada, as I'm sure you know, achieved statehood at the height of the Civil War. The state motto is 'Battle Born.' Now, you've just come from there, and this may not be easy, but you're going to want to say something nice about Nevada."

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Henry imagined the stage making the turn from Riddle, climbing the long rise, and seeing for the first time the lights of Wickahoney Station in the far distance. On a clear fall night, if it was not yet fully dark, passengers would see the gray wisps from the station chimney and, now, from the Madisons' campfire outlined against the darkening sky. Then getting closer still, the shadow of the Shoshone tent against the rimrock. One of the men off the stage had confessed to Henry, quietly, that he was unnerved, a bit spooked, by the sight of the Shoshone and their camp, and he questioned Henry about them after supper, and asked again before going to bed, and in the morning he would complain that he did not sleep at all during the night for fear of Indians.

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On horseback up in the Owyhees, riding slowly through a stand of quakies, Henry heard his mother's footsteps on the stairs. He made his way down the mountain, stabled his horse, woke himself. Downstairs, his mother, rocking in the chair in the parlor before what was left of the fire.

In the long hours before dawn, in heavy flannel pajamas and wool slippers, Henry's father walked the many rooms of the station. The long hallway, the empty downstairs bedrooms, the kitchen and parlor, the cold and dark interiors. In summer, when there were sometimes more guests than rooms, he paced quietly among the still figures in the front room, as they slept by the fire. At a stir, he would say, "It's nothing," or "It's not yet morning." He lit the lamp and sat at the long dining table. He read. He looked up, stared into shadows, his silence added to the silence of things,

of objects in cupboards, on shelves, of lamps and tables, the silence of wall-hangings on walls of wallpaper and plaster and lath and quarried rock and beyond, the unpersonified outside world.

"Sleep is more important than this," his father said more than once, as Henry sat down beside him at the table. "You should go back to sleep."

So Henry slept, his head on the table. Or the morning was close enough and they waited for it and when it came they took the lantern out to the barn to milk and return before dawn for coffee—to the guests still sleeping in the rooms or before the fire. Henry's father was not sad, not melancholic. He was not on the verge of despair, not haunted by sleep, by the inability to sleep, like Henry's mother, her despair seemingly contained by a great force of will. Arthur was himself. But in these hours before morning, a numbness in the air, in the house, outside in the meadow, a surrounding of silence at extremities, there was no savoring of the solitude and quiet, for Henry or for Arthur. There was the sense that such time could be ruined.

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After feeding and watering the horses, the chickens, after chopping wood, after milking, after emptying ashes from the kitchen range. After dark, Henry went outside, walked along the fence of deadfall that kept stock from the graves in the cemetery beside the orchard, its apples and plums and prunes and peaches hanging down in the dark like ornaments. The leaves full and not yet waiting to fall. The darkness falling between branches.

He quietly crossed the creek. He sat beneath a tree not far from the Madisons' camp. He heard them speaking in Shoshone inside the tent, the light of a lamp dimly illuminating the canvas walls. He heard the mother, or the grandmother, talking. At pauses, the children responded. There was laughter. His back against the tree, Henry drifted off to sleep. He dreamed of the salmon struggling below in the Wickahoney, their bodies slapping the surface, desperate, then disintegrating. He swam among them, disintegrating. He listened for his parents, their feet on the stairs, then woke to the quiet of crickets and the creek and returned to the station along the fence beside the five graves of a family he'd never known, gone completely now from the country. Arthur sat in the illuminated dark at the table, a book open, the lamp glowing beside him.

"You're curious, son."

"Yes."

"What did you discover?"

"They laugh more," Henry said.

"That's your discovery."

"Yes."

"Why do you think that is, son?"

"Why do you think we're awake?"

When dawn came they headed for the barn together, the sage hens and pheasants and grouse—like the low revving hum of a small engine, approaching then trailing off into the distance.

Old Man Buncell had the passengers and their trunks loaded, his team hitched and ready and stamping their feet in the morning chill, and he came in to Ada for the mail. She handed him the letter from Felix Warrens to family back in Pennsylvania, and Henry's request for a barometer from a meteorological instruments company out of Seattle, and the bundle from George Madison. Its top letter was addressed to Cato Sells, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Washington, D.C., and unlike the others, both the address and the return address on the envelope were typed. The return address was listed:

Mr. George Madison  
Wickahoney Station, Idaho

Old Man Buncell placed the mail in a heavy, multicolored canvas bag, double-folded over the top with metal, grommetted, padlocked holes.

From her seat alone at the table, Ada darned socks and out the north window watched the stage disappear and return, disappear, return. Out the opposite window she watched the first heavy snow falling on the mountains above Mountain City, fifty miles south.