

Michigan

Rich finally bit the bullet and went back there. He was 56, the person he wanted to see would be close to 70, and why keep screwing around if it's something you can't get past.

His lady friend Mallory encouraged him, pointing out that he'd brought it up at least 3 times, though when Rich asked her to come along she balked at that one, that would be overdoing it.

But she said have a good time, don't rush back-- which he agreed with, get it out of your system.

Rich hated the word closure, but this probably qualified. He waited until April 1st, that was his barometer for going over the Sierras on Highway 80 without having to put on chains, and that should hopefully apply to those stretches in Nevada too, where you assumed you were in the desert and in the clear but the elevations catching you by surprise.

And it did snow that first day but it was only flurries, and after that he was good, and you could open the window and stick your elbow out and you had the

smell of early grasses that was different from California and triggered old memories.

Rich would fall asleep in the first 20 minutes of a movie but he was an iron man behind the wheel, could go 12, 14 hours easy, and Google Maps gave him an ETA of 35, so he broke it into three days, spending the first night in Rock Springs, Wyoming, and the second in Newton, Iowa.

He enjoyed the friendly breakfast chatter in the small town cafes, and he learned that the corn date in Nebraska was April 15th, but with climate change (or *whatever* was going on) the farmers were confident the end of March, and that's when they were throwing it in the ground.

This was going to be tough. He was headed to a college town, 90 miles to go now, the second-guessing creeping in. Rich wondering, if I take a step back and *think* straight for a moment . . . what am I doing exactly . . . and who's going to benefit?

When he was 17, the summer before his senior year . . . and man, 38 years and change, 1981 . . . he did a cross-country bicycle ride, New York to California, 10

kids his age plus a leader, a guy a few years older trying to keep things under control.

One day a third of the way across Rich had mechanical problems and fell behind the group, and on a quiet stretch of road his bike became increasingly unrideable and he stuck his thumb out.

A family stopped, they'd been fishing somewhere, and the dad threw his bike in the boat, they drove him into town, and let him pitch his tent on their front lawn. There was a spin-off campus of the state university there, and the dad was on the faculty and gave him a little tour, and sometimes over the years Rich thought he should have gone to a school like that--or even *that* one.

The dad slept in the next morning, but the mom got up early and invited Rich into the kitchen and cooked him fried fish and eggs and sent him on his way. There was a bike store you could walk to and they took care of his repairs and he reunited with the group a week later in Minneapolis.

He didn't remember what he talked about with the mom in the kitchen. She was about 30, as close to Rich's

age as to her husband, who was probably 45. He did remember her being a bit nervous, as though she wasn't used to talking to strangers without the husband around.

There was a daughter 7 or 8 sitting at the table with Rich, and a little brother in a high chair. The daughter was painting designs on flat grey rocks and Rich didn't think of it at the time but she'd probably collected them at the lake or river where they'd been fishing.

When Rich left she gave him 3 of them for good luck. He put the rocks in his front handlebar bag and told the mom and daughter that he'd be sure and send a postcard when he got to California, and he and the group made it there the middle of August, but he never did.

He kept the three rocks though, on various desks for about 15 years until they finally got lost in a move.

A few years ago there was a guy and his girlfriend at a cocktail party talking about a long-distance bicycle trip they were planning, and Rich always enjoyed talking about his, and he gave them some tips, such as carry a freewheel remover and a pair of vice grips, otherwise

you can't change a broken spoke on the rear wheel--and they appreciated it and the man asked if he'd ever done any *solo* touring, and Rich said not really, except when he got separated from his group that time, and they wanted to hear all about that.

When Rich got home that night he was motivated to google around, what *happened* to those people . . . and that cozy town?

He couldn't remember the family's last name but he was pretty sure the dad was George, and he ran down the college faculty in alphabetical order and there were a couple Georges but when you clicked on their bios the ages didn't seem right--and Rich thought what am I doing, if the guy was in his 40's back then he'd be close to 80 now and retired for sure.

When you dug enough, some of the individual departments had *In Memoriam* pages, and there was a George Nowacki noted in the history department, and yeah, that could have been the guy, Rich thinking the family *did* have a Polish-sounding last name.

Not much there, other than he'd been a tenured professor for 12 years, and dang--he passed away in

1997, which if it *was* the guy would have been awful young, his early 60's.

Rich searched the county obituaries archive and he found George's. It didn't say much but there was a photo of him and it seemed in the ballpark. At the end of the notice it had him survived by his wife Janet and son Rodney, and preceded in death by his daughter Emily.

Rich got up and made a salami sandwich and poured himself a brandy, and he didn't want to, but he got back on the computer and searched for the daughter.

It didn't take long. She was killed in an accident on a two-lane highway outside of town in 1994, at the age of 20. She'd gone east to college, it said, and was thriving in school and in life, and she was home for Christmas break. The road was icy, the authorities said, and someone slid across.

There was a picture of her grown up, a bit of a smile but not-overdoing it, the same sensitive kid who gave him those rocks.

Rich went out back and lit a cigarette. It was a clear night, there was a stiff wind, and you could see airplanes

in the distance, and probably you could identify stars and planets if he knew what he was looking for. He felt like crying, he tried to, but he didn't.

A month later he wrote the mom a letter. He didn't say much, just that he was the guy that pitched the tent on their lawn that time, and he'd heard what happened . . . and he mentioned the rocks.

The mom, Janet, didn't answer the letter, and Rich sat on that for a couple years. Here he was now, pulling up in front of the house, 2 in the afternoon.

There was a fence that wasn't there before and the front lawn was gone, replaced by shrubs, but it was the same place, and Rich remembered George pointing out a famous campus building, red brick and ivy-covered, that you could see between houses, and he was looking at it now.

He took a deep breath and rang the bell. A man answered, an older guy chewing something, and he had work overalls on and some tools sticking out of the pockets.

Rich asked if Mrs. Nowacki was available and the guy sized him up for a moment and called over his

shoulder, “Jan,” and he went back to whatever he was doing.

Rich hadn’t considered this simple logic, that she’d likely gotten remarried, maybe even years ago. Janet appeared at the door and said hello and asked if she could help him. She looked okay, like an active senior, and her hair was done and she had on earrings.

Rich said he can’t expect her to remember this, but one summer, a long time ago, they rescued him, and it was an experience that had stayed with him.

Janet stood there a minute, and Rich would wonder later if she was deciding which way to go. What she said was, “Yes, I remember you. Now please respect our privacy.”

Rich nodded, and Janet closed the door.

He took a walk on campus. It was coming back to him, George showing him some of the academic buildings that day, and then the indoor pool, which Rich remembered being brand new and pristine.

He went inside and a young gal was swimming laps in the far lane, and there were some benches and Rich sat down and thought about what happened to George.

“Are you getting in today, or just observing?” the swimmer said, smiling. He hadn’t noticed her get out, and she was taking off her cap and goggles and grabbing a big towel.

Rich actually felt like jumping in, if he were set up for it, a nice reward after all that driving.

“I’m afraid I’m on the sidelines,” he said, managing a weak smile back.

“*There* you go,” she said, and she pulled on a pair of sweatpants and threw some stuff in a backpack and was gone.