

Why Visit America

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The Origins of This Great Nation

There wasn't anything special about us. We were just an average town. Porch swings, wading pools, split rail fences, pump jacks bobbing for oil on the horizon. Meetings at town hall were well attended, sure, but we weren't some hotbed of insurgents. We didn't subscribe to any one brand of politics. We couldn't even be plotted onto your basic left/right binary. Our town had everything: pro-lifers who supported gay marriage, pro-choicers who opposed gay marriage, climate change deniers who owned solar panels, universal health care campaigners who preferred private insurance, creationists with degrees in biology and geology, loyal conservatives, staunch liberals, moderates, radicals, and ornery retirees whose only real issue was guns. And yet that winter we found ourselves united by a common sentiment. We were fed up with our country. The executives were busy making donations that funded the campaigns of the politicians, the politicians were busy passing laws that protected the interests of the executives, and pretty much nothing else seemed to be getting done. We were antigovernment, we were anticorporate, but mostly we were normal people who couldn't afford to buy an election and had come to understand that our votes didn't mean shit. There were libertarians among us who had been pushing to secede for years now, but not until that winter, watching legal forms of graft being flaunted across the country like never before, did our town seriously begin to consider the proposition. The matter soon came to dominate our meetings. We knew that from a certain perspective seceding could be viewed as an act of treason, that it might mean arrest, might mean imprisonment, might even mean execution. And the debate at that final town hall meeting was appropriately heated. Most of us wavered, unsure which way we would vote until the very second those slips of paper got passed around. Several of us were so nervous that we felt faint. Ultimately, however, the decision was unanimous. We would rather face handcuffs, jail, even hanging, than spend another goddamned second living in that broke-down country. We voted to secede.

And so, on that day of January Thirteenth in the year of MMXVIII, we did. After the vote was tallied, we sent notice of our secession to both local and global media outlets, along with the sheriff of Real County, the governor of Texas, and the president of the United States. As dusk fell across our streets, we filed out of town hall, gathered around the poles in our yards, and took down Old Glory. We tucked the flags into our garbage cans, and then we sat in our houses, radios off, televisions off, computers off, sobered by

what we had done. The initial thrill had faded. Now, exhausted, we felt only fear. Holding hands with our spouses and our children and our parents and our neighbors, we waited for the repercussions, for the arrival of the humvees and the helicopters and the tanks and the bombers. But nothing happened. Nobody came. Nobody cared. At dawn, those of us who hadn't been able to sleep looked around and realized our community was still standing. We were free.

Our town had been called Plainfield. Although we liked the name well enough, we were concerned it wouldn't seem stately enough for a nation. And while we didn't regret seceding, we weren't ashamed of our origins either. In fact, we felt a great deal of nostalgia for our homeland. So, in memory of our former country, that was what we decided to name our new nation: America.

Home of the Traitor

Though the vote to secede was unanimous, there had in fact been three abstentions: Alex Cruz, Tony Osin, and Sam Holliday, who'd all been missing from that final town hall meeting. A group of us drove around the next morning to deliver the news. Alex, who lives in a motor home with flat tires behind the house where his grandparents raised him, is apolitical, an unemployed millennial, and absorbed the news with an expression of utter indifference before returning to a social media app. Tony, who works as a potter in the woodshed behind the house that his children bought for him, is apolitical, a proud alcoholic, and greeted the news with disinterest after being assured that the price of vodka wouldn't be affected. We knew better than to expect such a composed reaction from Sam Holliday, which was why we put off visiting him until last. A Vietnam vet who after being shot in the shoulder had dragged his wounded sergeant to safety through a muddy jungle infested with vipers and cobras, who in his youth had attained the distinguished rank of Eagle Scout by constructing trail markers for canyons in a state park, and who for decades had worked for the federal government as a bespectacled physician at Veterans Affairs, Sam loved the United States dearly, and had made clear at prior town hall meetings that he considered seceding a foolish enterprise. As we pulled into his driveway, he stepped out onto the porch in a denim shirt and a bolo tie with a shotgun in hand, a grizzled old widower with such rugged good looks that admittedly most of us were infatuated with him. Sam was a local hero, the most admired figure in our community, and we'd always imagined that if we ever actually seceded he'd be the one to lead the new nation, yet the more convinced we'd become that seceding was necessary, the more adamantly opposed he was to the very notion. A United States flag was waving on the pole in his yard.

Those of us there were led by Belle Clanton, a fiery libertarian who'd spearheaded the campaign to secede, whose voice that morning held a tremor of insecurity.

[Exchange as recorded in the journal of Ward Hernandez, barkeeper]

Sam spat in the dirt and said, "What brings y'all out here?"

"Just wanted to let you know that we seceded," Belle said.

Sam gave us a squint.

"You can't," Sam said.

"We did," Belle said.

The tension in the air was remarkable.

"We notified the county, the state, and the federal government. Nobody made any attempt to stop us from seceding. Nobody even tried telling us that seceding isn't

allowed,” Belle said.

Sam sneered and said, “Because nobody is taking you seriously. You can’t just secede by saying you’ve seceded. This land is still under the jurisdiction of the United States. You’re still going to have to obey the traffic laws. You’re still going to have to follow the health code. You’re still going to have to pay taxes.”

“I didn’t even pay taxes to that country when we were citizens of it,” Belle said.

“Ditto,” Trent said.

“Same,” Clint said.

“We’re going to need you to take down that flag,” Belle said.

Sam stared at us as if trying to gauge how many of us he could shoot before we would shoot him.

“Ward’s had a Mexican flag flying at his place for years, and ain’t nobody ever bothered him about it,” Sam said.

We had to admit he had a point there. He watched spitefully as we drove back toward the road. The United States flag was still waving on the pole. Even after everything that’s transpired in our nation since, visitors can still see that same flag flying in the yard when touring the home of Sam Holliday (see: MAP OF AMERICA, SITE OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE #7).

Cultural Reforms

Visitors to our country often remark upon the unique culture. Admittedly, when we realized we could do whatever we wanted, we were overcome by an astonishing sense of freedom. The possibilities were overwhelming. The town hall meeting the week after we seceded was just as crowded as the one the week before. Even Alex and Tony were there, looking curious about what would happen now that our town was a country. Sam Holliday, though, was once again notably absent, which made many of us anxious. Sam had never missed a town hall meeting before we seceded. He was an intelligent person. He was a respected person. And he was known to be headstrong. Belle Clanton, who was presiding over the meeting, kept glancing at the door, as if worried he might come storming into town hall at any second.

The first person who rose to speak at the meeting was Riley Whipper, who at the time was an all-star volleyball player over at the school and was recognizable for being the only citizen of our country with a septum piercing and bright pink hair.

[Transcript as recorded by Pam Cone, secretary]

RILEY WHIPPER: I think we need to talk about whether we’re going to continue to address each other by our genitals.

CROWD: *(silence)*

RILEY WHIPPER: Unless you all actually are as obsessed with your genitals as you seem to be.

CROWD: *(murmuring)*

MELANIE CURBEAM: Riley, I think the rest of us need a little bit of clarification on what exactly you’re talking about.

RILEY WHIPPER: You there, Bill Combs, do you consider your penis your defining characteristic as a person?

BILL COMBS: Uh, I mean, I really—

RILEY WHIPPER: And you, Terri Epps, do you consider your vagina your defining characteristic as a person?

RILEY WHIPPER: Now, I just, I mean—

RILEY WHIPPER: (*points dramatically at crowd*) Or are we more than our genitals?

CROWD: (*looking at each other*)

RILEY WHIPPER: Official documents to some people are addressed to a Mr., official documents to other people are addressed to a Ms. I understand these are meant as titles of respect. I do. I don't, however, understand why there have to be separate titles for us based on what genitals we have. Mr., Ms., that's what those titles are saying. "Honored person with a penis." "Honored person with a vagina." I mean, of all the possible information about a person you could attach to a title, why is sex the information we include?

ADRIAN MOREAU: Um, arguably those titles are in reference to gender, rather than sex.

PRESLEY OLSON: Not all men have a penis, and not all women have vaginas.

KENDRA GOLDBERG: And while we're on the topic, those aren't the only genders anyway.

RILEY WHIPPER: Okay, yeah, and that's exactly the point. In the United States, there are two official genders, and you're forced to identify as, and be identified as, one or the other. And, I don't know, I just think we should have a different system here. I think we should address each other by a neutral title, like Mx., so that people who aren't a conventional gender aren't mislabeled on a daily basis. So that people who are trans, who might be thinking about transitioning or might be starting to transition but might not be ready to tell other people about it, won't be put in a situation where you have to lie about what you are or reveal what you are before you're ready. I want to live in a decent country, in a country that treats every citizen equally. We could be that country.

CROWD: (*whispering*)

RILEY WHIPPER: I mean, seriously, are there any of you here who are so obsessed with your particular gender that you'd be opposed to being addressed by a neutral title?

MIKE COOKS: (*raising hand*) I'm not here to naysay, I'm not against the idea, but I'd just like to go on the record and say that I actually do consider my genitals my defining characteristic as a person.

BEV WHITTAKER: (*looking flushed*) Well. Well. That's just fine, Michael, thank you for sharing that.

The motion passed by a narrow margin. The next person to take the podium was Tim Kelly. Tim works as a furniture carpenter, has a reputation for fine craftsmanship, and that evening had dirty blond bangs sticking out from under the bent brim of a ball cap rippled with sweat stains.

[*Transcript as recorded by Pam Cone, secretary*]

TIM KELLY: Do you know how many countries there are that don't use the metric system? I'll tell you. Myanmar, Liberia, and the United States. That's it. Those are the only countries that haven't gone metric yet. Literally every other country in the world is metric. I was reading about this just the other day. I don't know about the rest of you, but if you handed me a map of the world, I wouldn't be able to point to Myanmar, and certainly wouldn't know where to find Liberia either. Am I even pronouncing the names of those places right?

ANGELINE RAMIREZ: Tim, are you saying you want us to switch to the metric system?

TIM KELLY: I think we got to ask ourselves, What type of country do we want to be? A modern, advanced, innovative country, at the forefront of science and industry?

Or a country like the United States?

The motion passed by a wide margin. The final person to take the podium was Antonio Vega. Antonio had formerly volunteered as the editor of the town newsletter, was now charged with the task of editing a national newsletter, and that evening had a shirt pocket lined with pens.

[Transcript as recorded by Pam Cone, secretary]

ANTONIO VEGA: I've been running this bulletin a long time, and there's something that's always bothered me, and that's the issue of copyrighted words. Words that start out as brand names. Dumpster. Popsicle. Rollerblade. Laundromat. In the United States, words like that are trademarked by different companies, which means if you use them, then you're required to capitalize them, or you're liable to get sued.

JENNY BERQUIST: Antonio, you're saying that companies could actually sue people just for using lowercase letters instead of uppercase ones?

ANTONIO VEGA: Language is supposed to belong to every citizen. Language is supposed to be a public good. Letting companies lock up certain words just infuriates me. On principle.

The motion was passed unanimously. Dumpsters are now dumpsters. Popsicles are popsicles. Rollerblades are rollerblades. Laundromats are laundromats. Realtors are realtors, frisbees are frisbees, jacuzzis are jacuzzis, sharpies are sharpies, tupperware is tupperware, styrofoam is styrofoam, velcro is velcro, jello is jello, speedos are speedos, chapstick is chapstick, kleenex is kleenex, post-its are post-its, q-tips are q-tips, band-aids are band-aids, ping-pong is ping-pong, and vaseline, goddamnit, is vaseline. In the immortal words of Antonio Vega, now inscribed on a brass monument of a dumpster commissioned by Antonio Vega (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PLACE OF GENERAL INTEREST #17), "A word cannot be owned; a word is not property; on this day, in this country, let all words be free!"

For many of us, leaving the meeting that night was the first time we'd ever felt a true sense of nationalism. In a single session, we had reformed gendered titles, converted to the metric system, and overturned copyright law decisively. Meanwhile, across the border, the United States government had been shut down for days. Capitol Hill couldn't even manage to pass a budget.

The First Tourist

Visitors often seem surprised to hear it, but for us the transition from "town within the United States" to "nation bordering the United States" was relatively easy. The process was simplified by the fact that there were no foreign agencies operating within our borders. The United States Postal Service had long ago shuttered the only post office in town, forcing us to drive to the next town over to pick up our mail. The nearest police station was the next town over. The nearest fire department was the next town over. The nearest military recruitment office, secretary of state, and veterans' home were towns away. Visitors will sometimes see vehicles belonging to foreign agencies: police cruisers operated by Texas or fire engines from Real County cutting through the country on the international highway that intersects Main Street. We don't mind these intrusions. Our country has a policy of open borders. Anybody is welcome to enter at any time, regardless of citizenship, with no restrictions. Many Americans in fact still work in the United States.

Visitors sometimes express concern that the lack of checkpoints at our borders might pose a security risk. But we've found an open-border policy to have a variety of benefits. After nearly a century of essentially no tourists whatsoever, we've experienced a relative boom. Notably, just over a month after our secession saw the arrival of our first tourist, a Dutch national named Johannes Dijkstra, who alighted from a semi and headed straight for the saloon on Main Street (see: MAP OF AMERICA, DINING AND SHOPPING #2). Just imagine, dear visitor, a foreign hipster with a handlebar mustache and a jaw of stubble stepping through the swinging doors of the saloon at high noon, wearing pastel shorts and a sweaty tank top with a pair of knockoff wayfarers hanging from the neck, carrying a banjo case and a duffel bag coated in dust.

"I am here to see America," Johannes announced, then added, "and to use an automated teller machine."

Those of us at the bar were disappointed to discover that Johannes, who was midway through a meandering hitchhiking trip from New York to Los Angeles, actually was not referring to our nation but instead meant the United States. However, upon being informed that he was now in a different country altogether, Johannes was delighted. He was especially interested to learn that our nation was so young. Johannes wanted to take a tour, so Pete Christie and Bob Tupper, who are both retired and never have much going on, offered to show him around. Johannes tossed his belongings into the bed of the pickup, flashed peace signs at some of us walking by, and climbed into the cab, already chatting away. Pete and Bob spent the afternoon taking him around: down to town hall, to check out the signed Resolution to Secede hanging framed on the wall; over to meet Belle Clanton, who had recently been nominated for president and took a break from brushing the horses in her stable to talk awhile; out to the coop behind the Garza place to see the heritage turkeys, pretty much extinct beyond our borders; out to the cellar at the Dylan place to hear the finer points of making cactus wine, our specialty; down to the flooded quarry, where some teenagers who had cut school were swimming and where after stripping nude he quickly mastered the art of the cannonball under the tutelage of Riley Whipper; to inspect the border signs that Walt Ho was building in his pole barn, with painted lettering on embossed wood, that would eventually proclaim WELCOME TO AMERICA; to examine the national flag that Bev Whittaker was stitching in her sewing room, a navy banner with a gold star, already fondly known as New Glory; down to the ice cream shop, shaped like an ice cream sundae, to treat him to an order of the famous "trough of ice cream" (see: MAP OF AMERICA, DINING AND SHOPPING #3). Johannes was amazed by everything. To be honest, there were some of us who had been feeling slightly insecure about our new nation, and his enthusiasm gave us a much-needed boost of self-esteem.

Evening found him knocking back tequilas at the saloon, chanting drinking songs with a crowd of regulars, his arms around Pete and Bob.

"I love this country," Johannes shouted.

Johannes, whose tequilas had been on the house, finally staggered over to the teller machine to withdraw the cash that he had planned to get when he first arrived that afternoon. When he tried, however, he was refused. Those of us in the saloon tried to help him, gathering around and taking turns pushing the buttons, but no matter what we did, his card just got spit back out. The screen suggested he contact his bank.

After crashing on a sofa at the Whippers', Johannes returned to the saloon the next morning, eyes bloodshot with a hangover. Ward cracked an egg into a glass, threw in some worcestershire and tabasco, flicked in a pinch of salt and of pepper, and slid the drink down the bar. Johannes drank the prairie oyster down with a gulp and then stared

into the glass with his elbows on the bar and his hands in his hair, explaining the situation with an expression of despair. He had been on the phone with his bank since sunup. He hadn't realized how fast he had been blowing through money. His savings account was empty. His credit card was maxed. He had hit his limit for cash advances.

He had spent the last of his money, he realized, on a box of twinkies.

"I am very fucked," Johannes said.

Ward put down a dishrag.

"You want a job?" Ward said.

Johannes glanced up with a hopeful look. "Here?"

"That's the idea."

"I do not need a visa?"

"Heck no, amigo, just grab an apron."

And thus our first tourist was also our first immigrant. Johannes eventually fell in love with Riley Whipper, left the saloon to be a full-time parent, and has since become a naturalized citizen of our country. Having authored a series of nationally acclaimed limericks, Johannes is currently the poet laureate of America.

The Summit

Although our sovereignty is not yet recognized by the United Nations, or by any of the member states of the United Nations, our nationhood is supported by multiple political parties in Catalonia, and we've received encouraging notes from diplomats of Venezuela, Cuba, Iran, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Emphatically, America does not officially identify as a "micronation," finding the "micro" to be somewhat disparaging, preferring to be called simply a "nation," but nevertheless, early on we did recognize the political reality of the situation, which was what led us to contact the various micronations of the world in the hopes of forming an alliance, and was what led us to organize the first international summit of the United Micronations.

Just imagine, dear visitor, the grand scene of that momentous gathering, which has since been reproduced in countless paintings and recounted in multiple ballads. Belle Clanton, who earlier that spring had been elected president of the republic, hosted the summit at her hacienda, a bright white adobe with a fountain burbling in the courtyard and vines hanging over the walls. Ward Hernandez strode through the gathering in a tuxedo, serving hors d'oeuvres to a colorful assembly of besuited figures from across the globe, including representatives of the micronations of Sealand, Liberland, Akhzivland, Forvik, Elleore, Talossa, Seborga, Murrawarri, Filettino, Užupis, Atlantium, New Utopia, Freetown Christiania, and Hutt River, who had all made epic journeys to reach this glorious enclave here in the Great Plains. As the oldest living person in America, Bev Whittaker offered a toast when the champagne was poured, saluting the revolutionary spirit of the summit. Johannes read a poem before the inaugural meal.

The summit was not without drama. Over the course of that week, Aubrey Ramirez was accused of stealing a diamond brooch by an emissary of Elleore; Daniel Curbeam got into a vicious argument about soccer with an envoy of Talossa; and Walt Ho, who is married, had a sultry affair with the ambassador of Seborga, which became a national scandal when a group of us stumbled upon him and the ambassador having a moonlight tryst in the vineyard behind the hacienda. Somebody with a lispy accent whose citizenship we never did manage to establish had a nearly fatal allergic reaction to a beesting while giving a speech about trade pacts and collapsed to the floor midsentence before being revived with an epipen. Meanwhile, the prime minister of Užupis, who

apparently had a regrettably slow internet connection back home, skipped most of the summit to take advantage of the free wifi, spending the weekend in bed with a laptop, binging entire seasons of a foreign comedy show. To be perfectly honest, we had underestimated the variety of challenges involved in international diplomacy.

On the first morning there was also an incident with Sam Holliday, which only added to the tension for those of us from America.

[Exchange as recorded in the journal of Ward Hernandez, barkeeper]

We were sitting around the table out on the patio when we heard a horse neighing in the distance. Sam rode up to the hacienda a second later, squinting beneath the brim of a straw hat, reining the horse in the dirt just beyond the patio. He didn't dismount.

"Can we help you, Sam?" Belle called.

Sam gazed at us with a fierce look, staring long and hard at each of us around the table, as if verifying that there truly was an international summit of micronations being held at the hacienda, that we really had organized such a thing, and then he scowled and turned and spurred the horse, riding back off toward the vineyard without saying a word.

"Who was that?" said the ambassador of Seborga.

Belle stared as the horse galloped off through the vineyard toward the hills.

"He didn't want to secede," Belle said.

"Change is hard for some," said the ambassador of Murrawarri.

"Best just to shoot resisters," said the ambassador of Filettino.

"He is too sexy, he would be invulnerable, a bullet could never kill him," said the ambassador of Seborga, dabbing out a cigarette.

The primary goal of the summit was to form an official alliance, and yet finding terms acceptable to every micronation proved difficult, in part because the talks kept going off on tangents. Like us, the other micronations were preoccupied with achieving global recognition. The panel on whether to take an official position on fossil fuels, the panel on whether to take an official position on capital punishment, the panel on whether to take an official position on a two-state solution, all the talks were inevitably hijacked by discussions about nationhood.

[Transcript as recorded by Pam Cone, secretary]

KING OF ELLEORE: We need more visibility.

QUEEN OF TALOSSA: We need some type of political leverage.

AMBASSADOR OF SEBORGA: Maybe we micronations could ask for assistance from established nations that also happen to be micro. Monaco, Singapore, Lesotho. Countries like these.

BOB TUPPER: *(shaking head)* None of those countries will even respond to us.

PETE CHRISTIE: *(sounding hopeful)* Maybe if we tried again the countries would listen.

KING OF ELLEORE: We must somehow be seen as powerful.

QUEEN OF TALOSSA: We must be respected.

AMBASSADOR OF FORVIK: We should pursue the possibility of becoming tax havens.

belle clanton: I don't think that would get us the type of attention we want.

AMBASSADOR OF FORVIK: Then we should pursue the possibility of nuclear armament.

BELLE CLANTON: I don't think that would get us the attention that we want either.

PRIME MINISTER OF UŽUPIS: (*wandering into dining room in pajamas*) Hasn't dinner been served yet?

REGENT OF SEALAND: The meeting's gone long, you can probably just watch another episode and then come back.

AMBASSADOR OF FORVIK: (*slapping hand on table*) I think the only option is to create a joint space program. If we want visibility, want to be respected, then our citizens must walk on the moon. There is no other way.

RILEY WHIPPER: Honestly all you really need is a semi-intelligent social media strategy.

There were moments during the summit when we were sure the talks would fail. Moments of defeat. Moments of despair. And yet through various miracles of diplomacy, on the final day of the summit, the gathered representatives met in the dining room to formalize an official alliance. Known as the American Accord, the treaty is currently displayed in an airtight case in the very room where it was signed, in the home of Belle Clanton (see: MAP OF AMERICA, SITE OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE #2). Visitors hoping to see foreign dignitaries should consult the official calendar for the United Micronations, as the alliance meets at the hacienda only once a year, on an irregular schedule.

The Last Independence Day in America

Even before that incident during the summit, many of us had been worried about Sam Holliday. Later that summer some of us drove out to Sam's place, a group of us who had known him as children, who had played wiffle ball with him in the schoolyard, who had played t-ball with him, who had played football with him, who had learned to read and write with him, who had been friends with him forever. A group of retired citizens, some wearing hearing aids, some wearing bifocal glasses. Standing there on his porch, we tried to persuade him to come to the next meeting, but he just wouldn't budge.

"I will not participate in that foolishness," Sam said.

Grace Curbeam, who was cousins with him and knew him well, asked if he was acting out because he was still angry that his wife had died.

"This has nothing to do with that," Sam said angrily.

Eventually we gave up. As we drove away, a terrible sadness came over those of us in the car. Before we seceded, he'd been one of us, going fly-fishing with us, playing dominoes with us, drinking mojitos with us, sitting around a table in a kitchen or a restaurant eating sloppy joes or slices of lemon meringue pie, but now he avoided us like we were a bunch of communists. We missed him and longed for some way to win him over. To be reconciled.

A week later another group of us drove out to his place, a group of adults who had volunteered to conduct a national census and were going around with official forms collecting information from people. Sam outright refused to participate.

"You have no authority to conduct a census on this soil," Sam said.

Becky Coots, who had worked under him as a nurse and still had a crush on him, asked him if maybe he could just fill out his data as a personal favor.

"I do not recognize the legitimacy of your government," Sam said.

Another group of us drove out to his place a week later, a group of teenagers who had recently written a national anthem and were going around performing the song for people a cappella. Sam refused even to listen.

"I have absolutely no interest in hearing your song," Sam said.

Cameron Ramirez, who had never met him before that moment and hadn't been properly warned about him, tried to explain that the lyrics would move him if he would only open his heart.

"You wrote an anthem for a country that factually doesn't exist," Sam said.

The next day was July Fourth, which is not a holiday in America, although all of us of course had celebrated the holiday before we'd seceded. Throughout the day, we watched footage on television of celebrations across the border. The citizens of the United States looked depressed and weary, with bloodshot eyes shadowed by puffy bags, and all appeared to be drinking heavily, presumably as a form of self-medication, to cope with the stress of having to live under a dystopian plutocracy that viewed corporations as legal persons and treated citizens like mere merchandise. We could remember looking like that, and felt relieved to be free, and pity for those who weren't. The general mood in our country that day was one of quiet introspection. Or was, that is, until night finally fell across our town, when fireworks began exploding in our sky.

Somebody was celebrating the Fourth of July.

We knew before we got there who was setting off the fireworks. For almost half a century he had personally funded the local show, and we found him where he had been every year before, at the bend in the creek just out of town, which offers the best vantage for shooting fireworks off over Main Street, but that year instead of being surrounded by a crowd of volunteers, Sam was shooting off fireworks alone. He was wearing a bright white stetson and a bright red oxford tucked into a pair of blue jeans, United States colors, and had a revolver in a leather holster at the small of his back. He stepped away from the launchers as we turned the flashlights on him. He looked tipsy and was smiling, a frightening grin that had hints of rage and desperation.

A group of us were there, led by Belle Clanton, who we knew was still furious that he had turned away the census takers and the kids who'd written the new anthem. She'd been looking for an excuse to confront him, and that was before he dared to set off fireworks. Those of us present were somewhat afraid what she might do.

[Exchange as recorded in the journal of Ward Hernandez, barkeeper]

Belle trembled with a righteous anger.

"What do you think you're doing?" Belle said.

"Celebrating," Sam said.

"This is America. Those fireworks don't make you a patriot here. Those fireworks make you a traitor," Belle said.

Sam's smile faltered. He gazed at her a second before spitting into the dirt. Then he scowled.

"I'm getting tired of this game you're playing," Sam said.

"It's not a game. It never has been. If you love the United States, if you love it there that much, then go live in it," Belle said.

Her hand hovered over the gun holstered to her hip.

"You're welcome to leave anytime," Belle said.

Sam stared at her. Water trickled through the darkness. Bullfrogs hooted in the creek. The tension in the air was terrifying. Those of us present watched him for any sudden movements, certain guns were about to be drawn, but after a pause he turned away, trudging back toward the road in silence, vanishing into the darkness beyond the trees, leaving behind the rest of the fireworks. Visitors can still see those crates of unused fireworks in the grass at the site of the Last Independence Day in America (see: map of america, site of historical importance #6), although the fireworks have since been

rendered unusable by exposure to the elements. And while that incident was resolved without bloodshed, most historians believe the episode was a turning point in the conflict and ultimately responsible for all the drama that came later.

Collectibles

All forms of currency are accepted in America, including dollars, pesos, euros, yen, yuan, won, pounds, francs, rand, kroner, kronor, kronur, and rupees, but most businesses prefer that purchases be made with the national currency, the illustrious. While illustrious can be used to buy anything from a jeep to a slinky, the bills are also prized for the unique design, with each being printed on imitation gold leaf. Doomsayers who are convinced the global financial system is on the verge of a total collapse pretty much any day now will also be pleased to learn that the illustrious is not fiat money but in fact is the only currency in the world currently fixed to a gold standard. Whether you're simply hoping for a memento of your time here or you're looking for a slip of paper that will still be worth something after the apocalypse, visitors can get illustrious at the American Bank (see: MAP OF AMERICA, FINANCIAL SERVICES #1).

Other popular souvenirs for visitors include the national postage. So far we've only printed a single design, featuring a bull and an armadillo sporting matching liberty caps, which among philatelists is often referred to as simply the American Stamp. Books of stamps can be purchased at the general store on Main Street (see: map of america, dining and shopping #1).

Visitors interested in taking native animals, plants, and minerals home as keepsakes are encouraged to shoot as many coyotes as you can carry.

Recreational Activities

America has a relatively lax attitude toward law and order, which creates unique opportunities for recreation. As possession of marijuana is legal in America, visitors are welcome to take a joint anywhere in the country. As possession of firearms is legal in America, visitors are welcome to do target practice anywhere in the country. All forms of gambling are legal in America, and visitors are invited down to the saloon every night to participate in a variety of contests, including hold 'em, arm wrestling, finger fillet, mancala, and honestly whatever the hell you're into. America also has no laws against trespassing, granting all persons the freedom to roam, and nature enthusiasts are encouraged to hike, swim, and camp wherever you'd like, although visitors should be warned that rattlesnakes and black widows are common, that the local pharmacy is not reliably stocked with antivenom for rattlesnakes and black widows, and that the abandoned silver mine is riddled with bottomless pits and flooded caverns and mazelike passageways that can bewilder even those explorers with enough common sense to bring a compass (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PRE-AMERICAN RUIN #2).

For an immersive cultural experience, visitors who've never had the opportunity to use a fully functional outhouse are invited to use the wood outhouse at Bob Tupper's (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PLACE OF GENERAL INTEREST #24), although you're warned to knock first, as he's often inside. For an authentic culinary experience, visitors who've never had the opportunity to try freshly squeezed cider should try the cider press over at Pete Christie's (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PLACE OF GENERAL INTEREST #27), although you're suggested to bring apples, as he's sometimes out. Jordan Fankhauser has a collection of wigs and toupees that is widely regarded as worth

seeing (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PLACE OF GENERAL INTEREST #35). Vanessa Bergquist has a critically acclaimed biscuit recipe that can be whipped up in a jiffy (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PLACE OF GENERAL INTEREST #38). Dominic Deloatch can leap a parked car on a dirt bike (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PLACE OF GENERAL INTEREST #41). Stephanie Khan can do breathtaking magic tricks that defy all explanation (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PLACE OF GENERAL INTEREST #42). Ivan Stepanov lost a couple of toes to frostbite and isn't shy about showing off the foot (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PLACE OF GENERAL INTEREST #43). Pam Cone plays a mean harmonica and can generally be heard playing at sunset on the steps of her trailer, and will even give visitors an introductory lesson (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PLACE OF GENERAL INTEREST #49). To experience some of the best in local conversation, visitors are invited to claim a rocking chair on the porch at Bev Whittaker's (see: MAP OF AMERICA, SITE OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE #10), or to venture over to the abandoned lumber mill (see: MAP OF AMERICA, PRE-AMERICAN RUIN #3), where the local teenagers often like to hang out at night, swapping gossip and discussing colorful topics ranging from incels to bukkake.

Hunters will be interested to hear that although there are currently no bounties being offered on local persons, Mx. Hannah Petrovich is offering a bounty of one thousand illustrious to the hunter who can bring her "a cougar with one eye and a black tip on its tail," which she witnessed eat her pet chihuahua, Sugar.

Sensational Reading

The most popular genre of reading in America, by far, is "books that have been banned by other countries," and there's no greater collection of banned books in the world than the one in the glorious halls of the American Library (see: MAP OF AMERICA, SITE OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE #13). On any given afternoon, visitors will find venerable citizens of our country seated at the sunny tables in the library, perusing notorious tomes. Books extolling the virtues of cannibalism. Books promoting obscene theories of evolution. Books detailing blushingly perverse sexual encounters. Books with thorough instructions for building homemade explosives. And yet the main attraction of the library is not the banned books section but rather the archive of historical documents stored at the back of the library, where visitors can read the collected letters of Sam Holliday. Weighing in at over a kilogram, the letters are widely regarded as the most scandalous work of literature in the library.

Here we'd thought he'd just been quietly brooding this whole time. We didn't realize until later that summer that for months he'd been mailing letters to institutions back across the border, trying to get the United States to intervene. He'd sent letters to Congress, the White House, the Supreme Court, and Homeland Security. He'd sent letters to the Army. He'd sent letters to the Navy. He'd sent letters to the Air Force. Out of what must have been sheer desperation, he'd even sent letters to the Coast Guard. Eloquent, heartfelt, pleading letters explaining that we'd seceded. Begging for somebody, anybody, to take action.

"I am the only one here still loyal to this country," Sam wrote in his seventh and final letter to the secretary of the Interior.

The United States plutocracy was busy committing various acts of corruption. The United States military was engaged in multiple foreign wars simultaneously. Nobody ever responded.

Sam had always been a meticulous record keeper, and kept a xerox of each letter in the safe in his office, for which we are grateful, given that the originals were probably lost, or shredded, or recycled, or are currently decomposing in landfills somewhere in the District of Columbia.

Priceless Photographs

Belle had pushed him too far that night at the creek. After the fight over the fireworks, Sam quit waiting for the United States to intervene. He gave up writing letters. He picked up the phone. He'd decided that if anybody was going to act, goddamnit, it was going to have to be him, and so the next week he made some calls, to real people, to ordinary people, people he had known back in the Scouts, people he had met during the Vietnam War, people he had befriended over at Veterans Affairs. People who doubtless owned starred-and-stripped apparel, and believed in manifest destiny, and spoke of exceptionalism unironically, and stood for "The Star-Spangled Banner" during sporting events, even when watching the sporting events on television. Nearly a hundred people answered the call to arms. Nearly a hundred veterans, mostly elderly, uniformly white, armed with shotguns and rifles and pistols and revolvers. Fervid patriots of the United States who couldn't bear for the country to cede even thirteen square kilometers of land.

We have an open-border policy. Our borders are literally never patrolled. Sam could have told the invading force just to drive straight into town on the highway. Instead, Sam cut a hole in the rusted fence out by the quarry in the dead of night, and the soldiers invaded our country under the cover of darkness, crawling across a hectare of rocky terrain to reach his property. Today visitors are welcome to strike a pose in the hole in the fence (see: map of america, site of historical importance #5), which has since become an iconic location for selfies.

Legendary Personalities

Belle lived alone in those years, and almost always had. In her youth she married a sweet, friendly therapist whose name is not worthy of print, who after a couple years of matrimony became abusive, slapping and hitting her one night when he was drunk. Belle didn't hesitate; she kicked him out the next morning, filed a restraining order, filed for a divorce, sprayed the hood of his coupe with some bird shot when he came around to try to reconcile, and was reaching for a shell of buckshot as he sped away, dust trailing. Afterward he moved to New Mexico, where he had come from, and where he later died of meningitis, which saddened no one. The bastard had never been one of us. Belle had been one of us since birth. She'd had an independent, rebellious, freethinking spirit even when she was young. She had loved zines and comix, punk and grunge. She was the one who had first thought to hang a rope swing from the giant mesquite tree out at the pond, and had first dared to hold a séance in the abandoned silver mine, and had first dared to throw a party out at the abandoned lumber mill. She had inherited the family farm when her parents had been killed in a car wreck on the highway, and though she had always been somewhat reckless and irresponsible, through sheer grit and determination she had overcome the tragedy, transforming the property from a modest homestead into a thriving business in a matter of years, selling off the livestock to plant a magnificent vineyard, tearing down the house to build a grand hacienda. There was nobody who loved our town, loved the gulch and the creek and the hills and the plains, as intensely as she did, recruiting groups of us for hikes on the weekend or taking hikes alone when the

rest of us were busy. She knew every centimeter of the land. She would notice if ragweed or mushrooms suddenly began growing in new patches of soil. She could tell the quality of soil from the taste of plucked chicory or clover. No matter where she was, she always knew where to find the nearest shade, or clay, or blackberries, or arrowheads. She hadn't been the first libertarian among us, had been introduced to libertarianism by others here, but she was the first to propose secession. She had been fighting over a decade for our town to secede. America was her dream. And yet she'd only wanted for us to be free. She'd never wanted to lead us. She had resisted the nomination for president, and had only reluctantly accepted the results of the election. She worried she didn't have the qualities a leader needed. She thought she was too impulsive. She thought she was too temperamental. Like the rest of us, she'd always assumed that if we ever actually seceded, Sam would be our president. Sam was the best of us, and always had been. There was nobody whose character was held in such high regard. Belle had tried so desperately to convince him during those meetings. She had longed for him to join us. We would have voted for him unanimously. He would have had her vote too. Instead, she had been forced to take on the burden of the presidency, and rather than leading us he seemed determined to oppose us. Belle would have hated for any of us to oppose the new country, but that it was him of all people troubled her greatly. The situation tormented her, the situation anguished her, afflicted her with doubt and apprehension, until finally she confided to some of us that she was so frustrated and discouraged and angry that she would have liked to just exile him. By then she considered him an enemy.

In America there's no relationship that's had such profound consequences for our country as the relationship between her and Sam. And yet she and he hardly knew each other, belonged to different generations, and encountered each other only a handful of times. In recognition of the historical significance, each of these locations is today marked with an official plaque. The spot in the parking lot of the pharmacy where she once exchanged some remarks with him about the sunny forecast. The spot where she and he once had a friendly conversation about barbecued tofu during a community cookout. The spot where she once pulled over her truck to help him change a flat on his pickup. The spot on the bleachers where she once sat next to him during a baseball game, her drinking a coke slushy, him eating some cotton candy, mere weeks before we seceded, when she tried one last time to persuade him to vote for independence. His porch, during the argument about the flag. Her patio, during the incident at the summit. The confrontation at the creek.

The penultimate encounter occurred July Thirteenth, when she happened to cross paths with him at the general store, pushing shopping carts down the produce aisle from opposite directions, intersecting eventually at the crate of bananas. Without speaking to each other or acknowledging each other whatsoever, she and he are said to have engaged in simultaneous conversations with Joselyn Fankhauser, the teenage clerk, about the ripeness of the bananas, Belle remarking upon how bananas tasted best when the peels still had a hint of green, Sam commenting upon how bananas tasted best when the peel was just beginning to turn brown, which many of us present interpreted as a coded debate about politics and democracy and nationhood. Neither she nor he bought any bananas. Two days later our country was invaded.

The Showdown

In America, when we gather for meals, we have a tradition of always saving the best for last, regardless of whether the dish would technically be classified as appetizer or entrée

or dessert or digestif. Whether it's sweet or it's salty, we like to end with the best we've got. This guidebook isn't any different. Now that you've made it here to the end, dear visitor, we're proud to present the premier tourist attraction in our country.

Main Street. July Fifteenth. Sam Holliday came trotting into town at high noon wearing a cowboy hat and a white bandanna, swaying in the saddle of a stately horse as the flag he was holding, Old Glory, waved grandly in the wind. Behind him marched nearly a hundred foreign soldiers wielding shotguns and rifles and pistols and revolvers, some with weathered skin, some with windburned faces, some with gnarled beards, some with thick mustaches, with overbites and underbites and eyeglasses and eyepatches and fleshy scars and prosthetic limbs and beady squints and furious scowls and class rings with glinting birthstones, strangers to all of us, dressed in military fatigues and kevlar vests and combat jackets and an array of faded t-shirts screenprinted with images of bald eagles and bison and howling wolves. Mount Rushmore. Lady Liberty. We heard him and the soldiers coming, a distant murmur of boots and hooves, a growing chorus of voices and whinnies, frightening thunderclaps of noise, before we could see anything, and then he and the soldiers came into view, turning onto the street in a mass, marching straight to the center of town, occupying the section of the street just across from town hall. A militia of overemotional jingoists, looking agitated and disturbed and ready for a showdown. A terrifying sight to behold.

Sam had chosen the timing of the invasion for maximum impact. It was a weekend. Saturday in the summertime. Some fifty of us happened to be downtown, observing the invasion from some fifty different perspectives. Pam Cone, who was leaning against the hitching post over at the saloon, stared at the soldiers while playing a song on the harmonica. Ward Hernandez stepped up to the doors of the saloon with a dishrag, gazing out at the soldiers with a frown, as Bob Tupper and Pete Christie, who had been playing a game of cards at the table next to the windows, turned to look at the soldiers through the dusty glass. Antonio Vega watched the soldiers from where he was pumping gasoline into a sedan, while Becky Coots, who had gone into the gas station to buy a portable phone charger just in case of emergencies, stared at the scene in the street with the cashier on duty, Rick Pinkney. Tim Kelly watched the soldiers from where he was pulling a sack of ice from a commercial freezer, while Cameron Ramirez, who had gone into the general store to hang a flyer about glee club, stared at the scene in the street with the manager on duty, Hannah Petrovich. The Fankhausers, who had just walked out of the bank with some complimentary lollipops and a receipt for a deposit, froze in the door of the bank. The Bergquists, who had just walked out of the pharmacy with a package of disposable razors and some prescription ritalin, froze in the door of the pharmacy. Across the street, the Garzas and the Dylans, who had just left the library together, stood stock-still in the parking lot with tote bags full of books, staring at the soldiers with expressions of uncertainty, confusion, fear, and dread. Alex Cruz, who had been sitting on a bench playing a game on his phone, literally gaped at the soldiers with a slack jaw. Tony Osin, who had been shuffling to his truck with a liter of margarita mix, was gazing at the soldiers with a look of astonishment. Walt Ho stared at the scene from behind the window of the salon, draped with an apron, getting his bangs trimmed by James Whipper, who was also staring, holding a pair of scissors. Bev Whittaker stared at the scene from the window at the dentist, draped with an apron, getting her teeth cleaned by Audrey Whipper, who was also staring, holding a strand of floss. Riley Whipper, Presley Olson, Kendra Goldberg, Adrian Moreau, and Mike Cooks, who had just smoked a bowl and were all high as fuck, were watching in shock from the picnic table at the ice cream shop, holding spoons over a trough of ice cream, heaped scoops of

maple walnut and salted caramel and praline and nutella topped with spirals of whipped cream, which was beginning to melt in the sun. Allison Deloatch, who was working her first shift ever at the ice cream shop, her first job, was peering out the window of the shop, clutching the instruction manual for new employees as if that might explain what to do in the event of an invasion. Kimberly Khan, who had been hanging from the monkey bars at the playground in her lucky outfit, off-brand chucks and a romper with rainbow barrettes in her hair, stared at the soldiers only a second before dropping to the wood chips and bolting back toward home.

Sam dismounted from the horse with the flag as a couple of soldiers in camouflage face paint strolled over to the pole at town hall to take down New Glory.

“This town is under the jurisdiction of the United States. Every person here is a citizen of the United States. Starting today, this town will remain under martial law until every last citizen has taken a vow, swearing loyalty to the United States and renouncing loyalty to the micronation America,” Sam hollered.

Belle Clanton, who had been about to embark on a group hike in the hills, had already received over a dozen separate texts from those of us in town. After recruiting those of us already at the trailhead to form a posse, she got to town the quickest way that she could, mounting the horse in the stable behind her hacienda and galloping bareback through the gulch at a breakneck speed, taking the nearest shortcut, through the hills instead of around. Old Glory was already flying from the pole at town hall. Belle came riding into town just as the pair of soldiers in the camouflage face paint were setting fire to New Glory, dropping the flag into a trash can.

At the sight of that flag burning she spurred the horse straight at the militia, reining the horse only meters away from the front line. Sam turned from the fire to face her. Dismounting, she squared off against him and the foreign soldiers, outnumbered nearly a hundred to one.

The doors to the buildings were all propped open for the breeze. All the windows were open too, pushed up or cranked out. Even those of us in buildings could hear the exchange that followed.

“Sam,” Belle shouted.

“Belle,” Sam called.

And then she and he both fell silent, staring at each other across that lonely expanse of pavement. Nobody moved. Sunlight shimmered on the barrels of the firearms. Fingers hovered over triggers. Thumbs hovered over hammers. An actual tumbleweed, swear to god, suddenly blew into the road, and then stopped awkwardly in the middle of the street when the wind died. None of us had ever felt such palpable tension in the air. Not ever.

Belle was armed only with the colt derringer she had inherited from her parents with the farm. She carried the gun to scare off mountain lions and bears. It had a pearl handle and a single shot.

The tumbleweed blew off into an alley.

“We’re here to enforce the lawful dominion of the United States,” Sam yelled.

“Goddamnit, Sam, what do you love so much about the United States?” Belle shouted.

Sam hesitated a second, which surprised all of us, that he’d need to think. He glanced over at town hall, and then turned back toward her with a desperate expression. He looked haggard, with a weary slump to his shoulders and dark pits under his eyes, and instead of the clean-shaven face that he usually had, his face was stubbled and gaunt and sagging. His wrinkles had deepened dramatically over the past few months. He looked

bad, we suddenly realized. As bad as after his wife died. All those months when he'd been grieving.

"It's the great experiment. A land of progress. A land of equality. A place where all of humanity can experiment, and innovate, and invent, and try new things. The first place on the planet where people of every race and every culture came to live together. To collaborate. To coexist. That's what makes the United States special," Sam shouted.

"The United States isn't any of that anymore," Belle shouted.

Kimberly Khan came running back to the playground with a loaded carbine, hurried up the steps of the slide, vanished headfirst into the top of the tube, gradually slid down the bends in the slide, then reappeared at the bottom of the tube, lying there in the mouth of the slide with the stance of a sniper, grimly aiming the carbine at the street.

"All anybody in that country can accomplish is the occasional filibuster," Belle shouted.

She waited for him to respond to her, but he was silent.

"Reps and senators are bought and sold by the highest bidder," Belle shouted.

She gave him another chance to dispute her, but he kept quiet.

"It's literally legal now for the one percent to buy elections," Belle shouted.

Sam glanced down at the pavement as a gust of wind rustled the bandanna around his neck.

"The United States has gone to hell, Sam. The roads are shit. The schools are shit. The health care is shit. All the money's being funneled to the politicians and the corporations and all the millionaires are becoming billionaires off all the debt and the exploitation. I know that you know that it's true. The system is failing. The system is broken. It's time to get out. It's time to start over. None of us deserves to die in that hellhole," Belle shouted.

"But," Sam said, then hesitated, glancing back at town hall with a look of profound sorrow before gesturing helplessly and exclaiming, "it's our country."

Belle threw her hands wide as her hair whipped around her face with another gust of wind.

"It was once. It doesn't have to be anymore. You're an American at heart, Sam. I know you are. You were born here. Just look around. What you said about the United States, about what it used to be, about progress and equality and being able to invent and innovate and try new things, that's the spirit of America. You won't find that in the United States. There the spirit of America is dead. Now the spirit of America lives here," Belle shouted.

Sam looked at all of us, glancing between the windows and the doors and the porches of the buildings lining the street, and each of us felt a powerful sense of familiarity when he locked eyes with us, as he recognized each of our faces, as he remembered each of our names.

"There's nothing as American as seceding," Belle said.

Sam turned back to look at her, and those of us closest to him suddenly saw tears shimmering in his eyes, and his voice cracked when he spoke.

"I love that country," Sam said.

"We all did," Belle said.

"With all of my heart," Sam said.

"It can't be saved," Belle said.

Sam looked down at the ground, then blinked, and grimaced, and a couple of tears streaked down the furrowed wrinkles in his face.

"I know," Sam whispered.

The soldiers behind him looked concerned.

"Sam?" murmured a soldier in a hunting cap, frowning at him, as if realizing that he had changed, that he was about to order the soldiers to stand down, that he was about to order the soldiers to pull out. We all saw the look on his face. He wasn't one of them anymore. He was finally one of us. Goosebumps tingled down our necks and along our arms. Belle looked as moved as the rest of us, but while what she'd said might have finally gotten through to him, what she'd said had only hardened the resolve of the soldiers, and before he could speak the soldiers acted without him. "You're all a bunch of agitators," shouted a soldier in camouflage face paint, as a soldier in military fatigues shouted, "Y'all are a bunch of subversives." The soldiers raised the shotguns and the rifles and the pistols and the revolvers to ready positions, stocks to shoulders, grips in hand. Belle reacted on instinct, drawing the colt derringer, and seeing her raise the weapon the soldiers responded by opening fire on the town. Johannes, who at that exact second came strolling out of the library with a book of haikus, completely oblivious to the standoff in the street, got clipped in the shoulder and flipped backward over a hedge, as the rest of us ducked behind railings and windowsills and doorframes and benches for cover, firing back at the soldiers with whatever we happened to be carrying as bullets shattered glass and dented metal and splintered wood up and down the street.

The shootout was over in less than a minute. From a tactical perspective, the militia had chosen a catastrophic position, exposed on all sides. By the time the gunfire ceased, every last soldier was on the pavement, either dead or dying or feebly attempting to crawl away. Brain matter was spattered across the pavement. Both of the horses had been slain. Sam hadn't moved, miraculously hadn't been shot once, hadn't fired a shot either, was just standing there in the road with a look of shock. Johannes had staggered back up off the ground, holding the wounded shoulder, grimacing bravely, showing the heroic fortitude that only a true poet could possess. The rest of us all seemed to be more or less okay, except the president.

Belle was sprawled across the pavement. She had been shot in her chest and her abdomen, had taken a bullet just above her knee, and was bleeding where her earlobe had been grazed. Her fingers were twitching horribly.

Sam was the only trained physician at the scene. He could have run to any wounded person there, but he didn't hesitate. He ran to her, dropping to his knees as a gust of wind blew the cowboy hat from his head.

"It should have been you," Belle said.

"Don't try to talk," Sam said, wrenching off his bandanna to use as a tourniquet.

"You should have been president," Belle said.

"Just lie still for a second," Sam said, tying the tourniquet tight around her thigh.

"From the beginning," Belle said.

Sam shouted for somebody to get a car.

"Take care of this place," Belle said, coughing up blood, then fainted away, and though he tried to resuscitate her, she couldn't be revived.

Sam rushed her to the med center in the back of a station wagon.

By then those of us in the posse had arrived at the scene, horrified by the carnage. We were furious at the militia for invading our country and shooting our president, would have liked to have executed each and every one of the soldiers who were still alive, but we don't enjoy killing, and we aren't without mercy, so we let the soldiers who could still move attempt to crawl away to safety. None of the soldiers managed to get farther than the outskirts of town. The last of the soldiers expired under the yucca tree behind the school, with a whimper.

Just as we were beginning to clear the bodies from the street, a fluorescent camper van came gliding into town on the highway, driven by a foreigner wearing a silk headscarf and far too much mascara. She brought the camper van to a halt before leaning out the window.

Bev Whittaker, whose heart was still pounding from all the excitement, was standing over the body of a soldier nearby.

“What’s all of this?” the driver said.

“Just fought a battle,” Bev Whittaker said.

“Some kind of reenactment?” the driver said.

“The war’s over now,” Bev Whittaker said.

The driver surveyed the bodies in the road with a look of contemplation.

“God bless America,” the driver said, and we thanked her.

The camper van maneuvered carefully through the bodies and then carried on down the highway.

We buried the soldiers in a mass grave out in the hills (see: map of america, war memorial #1).

Belle survived, to our great relief, but she’d taken a bullet in her spine, and she’ll never recover use of her limbs. She now spends most of the day in a wheelchair. She needs help taking drinks of water. She needs help taking bites of food. She needs help getting to the bathtub. She has to be washed and dressed by other hands. She’ll never be able to hike the land again. And yet, though she was initially discouraged by the change, even overwhelmed, she’s adjusted with characteristic resilience, and says she doesn’t regret taking a stand against the militia. America is her dream. She would have willingly died for it. She can still see, and hear, and smell, and taste, and speak, and cry, and laugh, and has found that in many respects her life is even richer than before. Only a change in perspective.

Sam was appointed interim president while she was hospitalized. Upon being discharged, she gladly resigned, and though he felt he didn’t deserve to be president after having invaded the country with a foreign militia, he accepted the position when she insisted. America has prospered under him, as we had always known the country would.

Sam had just one condition, which was that he would only agree to be president if she would allow him to serve as her caretaker, without pay. Visitors to his home will almost always find the house empty, as he now spends day and night out at her hacienda. Aside from when volunteers cover for him, he’s the one who lifts her in and out of bed, and combs her hair, and trims her nails, and flosses her teeth, and brushes her teeth, and holds a dixie cup to her mouth for her to spit out swished mouthwash, and washes all her clothing, and prepares all her meals, and switches the station on the radio when she wants, and turns pages for her when she feels like reading. He’s also the one who figured out how to take her to her favorite view. Earlier this autumn he bought a covered wagon, and now every afternoon, rain or shine, he helps her into the wagon and hitches the wagon to a pair of horses and then drives the wagon through the vineyard, bringing her where cars can’t, into the gulch and across the creek and through the narrow ravine winding deep into the hills, where a rocky trail leads to a scenic overlook above the plains that she discovered when she was young. Sam sits with her in the back of the wagon at the crest of the hill, and she talks with him as he helps her take sips of mint julep or eat slices of pumpkin pie. He never makes a decision about the country without consulting her, and occasionally she and he spend the time deliberating bureaucratic affairs, but often she and he spend the time discussing personal topics instead. Memories. Regrets. Horoscopes. The meaning of dreams. We like to be there when we can, just to sit there in

the wagon, listening to her and him talk as we watch weather cross the plains below. To us, there's no experience as powerful in all the country (see: MAP OF AMERICA, SITE OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE #3).

Welcome, dear visitor, to a proud and storied nation. When you put down this guidebook, look around you. A nation isn't land. A nation is people. We're what we are because of who we are. Love is greater than hate. Love is greater than greed. Love is greater than fear. America is a country whose people love each other. As you walk through these streets, look at the people you pass. There's the love between friends. There's the love between spouses. There's the love between parents and children. There's the love between neighbors, fellow citizens of a great nation. But there's no love as pure and as beautiful as the love between bitter enemies, united at last.