

Serendipity

Interstate 80 crosses the United States from New York to San Francisco with 4680 kilometers of road. **C** had travelled more than 1400 of them, from Lincoln, Nebraska, to Salt Lake City, Utah. On November 23, 2013, he changed course and turned onto Interstate 84 heading north.

The Ford Focus wasn't the ideal car for crossing the United States, but **C**, after extensive research on the web, was happy to have finally found it, even if it was rather small for that trip. He had almost forgone renting a car and was thinking of searching for rides on Facebook/Zimride when he found an agency in Raleigh that offered that model at an affordable price. **C** found himself in South Carolina as the guest of a colleague he had met years before. With the help of his friend, he finalized the contract: he would return the car at the airport in Portland, Oregon, after twenty two days, spending \$1150.

C was fulfilling an old dream: the coast to coast. He split the drive into rather long stretches and stopped for several days in each place, both to visit it and to relax. He planned each leg of the journey in turn, guided by curiosity and the offers for lodging that he found online. In four stages, he arrived in Salt Lake City, where he had found lodging with a very cultured young man who rented several rooms in his beautiful home.

After four days, he got back on the road, heading for Boise.

He was accompanied by Ester, a graduate student in Geology, who had asked for a ride to Twin Falls, a small city halfway along his route. When he as young, **C** had often hitchhiked, and now Ester was doing the same thing, but she wasn't standing on the side of the road with her thumb up: thanks to carpooling, she was picked up as if she were taking a taxi! This was precisely the first topic of conversation at the start of the trip. Then **C** told her about the impressions he had formed during the previous legs of his journey. He was struck by the profound sound of the whistles of the freight trains that supply the Eastern states. That sound had accompanied him for the entire trip, and he had the feeling that on those trains ideas and values also travelled, slowly. He had already been familiar with the prairies that he had crossed in Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming...the herds of cattle...the extensive ranches. But they seemed to him very different than those he had seen in films. He didn't understand the derision that many, starting with Frank Baum in *The Wizard of Oz*, reserve for "the gray prairies" of Kansas. After passing through the Appalachian Mountains, he had entered a new world characterized by cultural, musical, religious events that he began to think about in new ways. The emotions aroused by the sun rising over those flat horizons, setting them afire, had stirred his thoughts. Robert Pirsig's assertion in *Lila*, "The idea that 'all men are created equal' is a gift to the world from the American Indian," no longer seemed so surprising.

It was at that point that Ester asked him what the reason for this trip was.

C hid a certain embarrassment. Many young people took trips like his without any particular reason; he had happened to meet and travel with them. Perhaps to be polite, they treated him as if he were their age. Now Ester's question brought him back to the fact that he was a man of sixty-five years, recently retired. Why travel like a young man? How could he explain something that, in part, still escaped even him?

Before retirement, **C** had been very worried. He had no idea what he would do without the work that, until now, had completely filled his life. He could have prolonged his

tenure at the school he ran for several years—something which, moreover, had been persistently requested by his colleagues. But he had refused to prolong a situation which was destined to end in any case, in order to confront in fine form that which he considered a "research" trip.

Chance led him more than it would have on a classic tourist trip, and because of that he could consider himself a traveler in all respects. The main destination, Christmas Island—Kirimas in the Kiribati language—brought itself to his attention for the first time in 1984. He was in a library in Lisbon, leafing through a geography book: Kirimmas was the largest coral atoll in the world, even though it was a tiny island. After repeated chance occurrences in the following years, that remote island in the Pacific Ocean had finally aroused his curiosity. It was one of the most isolated inhabited places in the world. The idea of taking a long journey, immediately after retirement, had been born with precisely those incidents, and it grew and grew in meaning. *Animum debes mutare non caelum* (you must change your state of mind, not your sky), writes Seneca; but he was convinced that meeting and getting to know women, men, places under different skies helps change one's state of mind, and he was open to gathering direction from them. He had planned his departure for September 22, 2013, and his return home for March 1, 2014, intending to spend at least the week of Christmas on Christmas Island and then to continue on to Australia. He would visit some cousins who had emigrated in the fifties. His family had maintained a relationship with them despite the great distance. His parents had gone to visit them many years before, and he liked the idea of making the same trip now that he had reached the same age that his father had been then.

The conversation became more and more friendly, and **C** asked Ester if she was Mormon. Smiling, she said that not all the inhabitants of Salt Lake City are Mormon, but then she acknowledged having been one. **C** had already met young Mormons who had abandoned their church, above all because they couldn't stand its rigid morals that prohibited, with zero tolerance, sex before marriage. He wished to deepen his knowledge of many aspects of that religion with Ester. When he had visited the Washington D.C Mormon Temple, with its space-age architecture, and the Salt Lake Temple, he had become convinced that this religion had some importance in the social life of the United States, and he was truly curious to learn more about it. He had only seen either temple from the outside, given that access is permitted only to church members. These exclusive aspects often make formal separation from the Mormon Church painful.

He, too, had separated himself from the Catholic religion. It happened on a Sunday in 1970. He was in the church he had frequented since he was a child, where he had been an altar boy. During the sermon the priest spoke against the adoption of the divorce law in Italy. He had interpreted those words as an imposition of Catholic ethical principles on all citizens. Since then he had begun a personal spiritual search, but he still went to church on the occasion of weddings and funerals of family and friends. In the brief conversation that followed, he came to understand that for Ester, abandoning the Mormon Church had been much more painful: it had entailed separation from a community.

Ester changed the subject, preferring to talk about her studies of the area's geology. She often mentioned "Lake Bonneville" until **C** asked her where this lake was. "You really don't know its story?" exclaimed Ester, surprised. "When we left Salt Lake City on I-84,

we drove through the bottom of a lake that once filled the whole valley, and on the first stretch, we skirted the last remnant of the great Lake Bonneville. At the time it was one of the biggest lakes in America".

The previous day **C** had gone up to Brighton, a ski resort in the mountains surrounding the Great Salt Lake. On the way back, he had paused to look out over the immense valley that a century and a half earlier had been colonized by the Mormon pioneers. The view had reminded him of the part of the Po Valley bordered by a large semicircle formed to the north by the Pennine Alps, to the west by the Cottian Alps, to the south by the Ligurian Alps, and finally by the beginning of the Apennines. **C** saw that vast plain from Mosso, a small town at the foot of Monte Rosa, where he was the principal of a secondary school for two years. The valley included all the cities in which he had passed his life: Alessandria, where he was born, and then Pavia, Vercelli...now it seemed modest in contrast with the vastness that he had before him.

Ester told him that around 18,000 years ago, the level of Lake Bonneville had risen up to overflow a natural dam that, due to its weakness, was quickly swept away. A volume of water equal to 380 cubic miles poured out into the valley below. In less than a year, the lake emptied, the water level dropping more than thirty meters. The valley was overwhelmed by a flood, the violence of which carved in a short time a channel that otherwise would have been eroded by water over millions of years, as happened for the Grand Canyon. During a rest stop, **C**, struck by the story, took out his iPad to better understand the size of the catastrophe. He looked up information on Lake Como, which he knew well, to contrast the volumes. After a few calculations, he tried to imagine a volume of water equal to seventy Lake Comos pouring into the Po Valley, overflowing the dam near Lecco. Then he remembered the disaster that occurred in Italy in 1963 in the valley of the Vajont River. At the time he was a young man, but the images of that avalanche of water crashing over the village of Longarone were still very much alive in his mind because the tragedy had been talked about for years. A dam had been constructed in a geologically ill-suited spot. The artificial lake had soaked the soil, causing an immense landslide that forced all the water to overflow, resulting in 1917 casualties. **C** consulted Wikipedia again and made more calculations: the volume of water that had interred Longarone was 200 times smaller than that of Lake Como! So the volume of water that poured out of Lake Bonneville, carving what is now called Snake River, was 14,000 times bigger than that of Longarone. Bewildered by his own calculations, he gave up trying to put a phenomenon of that size in perspective and asked Ester if at the time of the disaster humans lived in that area. Surprised, Ester replied that the dating of the catastrophe, as well as that of human presence in North America, is still too uncertain to answer such a question. **C** thought that if a group of humans had survived that event, they would have passed down a legendary tale. Like that of the Great Flood. But he didn't hazard explaining this fancy to Ester, who had proved to be a scholar very attentive to empirical evidence.

The conversation had been enjoyable, and they had arrived, almost without noticing, in Twin Falls. Past the bridge over Snake River, Ester motioned for him to stop. The canyon that had been carved in only a few months by the force of the water from Lake Bonneville lay before them in all its tremendous beauty. Then they got back on the road, stopping at various points of the canyon, and visited Shoshone Falls. Ester improvised a lesson on the different rock layers. The lesson continued to Twin Falls, on Addison Avenue, at the Burger Stop. **C** insisted on offering lunch to the young woman as thanks for all the interesting information. Without that chance encounter, the drive would have

been a simple means of transportation. After warm goodbyes, **C** left again on his own; he still had far to go to reach Boise.

Many months later, **A** discovered that the place across from Burger Stop, on the other side of Addison Avenue, was called Serendipity.