

## *From Hell to Breakfast*

✚ DAWN WAS ONLY A FAINT GLOW BEHIND THE BLACK CRESTS of Skull Mountain and the Specter Range when I swung off Highway 95 and arrived, ten hours hard driving away from home. It was still too dark to pitch a tent, so I bundled my sleeping bag around me and curled up on the car seat. An hour later, groggy and aching, sleeping bag strings imprinted upon my cheek, I gave up on sleep and ventured out with my tin cup in hope of coffee. Someone who'd seen my little brother up at the gates of the encampment sent me his way.

In the morning light everything looked familiar again, the hard pale ground paved with rocks and the roads kicked into dust, the evenly spaced tufts of thorny grasses and scrubby bushes—the almost ubiquitous texture of the Great Basin, the plateau between the Sierra and the Rockies. The explorer John C. Fremont named it the Great Basin in the 1840s, when he realized that this vast expanse doesn't drain into either side of the Continental Divide. For one thing, there's hardly anything to drain. The major river in this place, the Humboldt, doesn't go anywhere at all; after flowing most of the way across northern Nevada it fades away into an alkali flat. Range after range of mountains, each separated by a flat expanse like the one the camp was in, rise for hundreds of dry miles across the state of Nevada into Utah, stretching north into Oregon and Idaho, hemmed in on the south by the Colorado River. It was the lowest, hottest, driest southwest corner of the Basin that I woke up in, and across the Funeral Mountains to the west, the Basin ends, and California, Death Valley, and the Mojave Desert begin.

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I remembered to be afraid of the dust, the dust that might be radioactive, the dust that over the next few days would powder everything to biscuit color, the dust that might be the dust of the hundreds of nuclear tests conducted somewhere across the highway I'd just driven in on. At first I hadn't been alarmed by the dust here, and later it became second nature to fear dust everywhere, but this dust didn't look like anything special to the naked eye. Most studies suggested that the background radiation at the Peace Camp wasn't any worse than that in Las Vegas, seventy miles to the south, since they were both upwind of most of the nuclear tests—though that wasn't comforting, especially if you lived in Las Vegas. It wasn't the background radiation but the fallout mixed into the fine, pale, silky powder that posed most threat, however. "I will show you fear in a handful of dust," said a poet.

But to see mortality in the dust by imagining in it the unstable isotopes of radioactive decay took an act of educated faith or perhaps of loss of faith in the government. It looked like ordinary dust, and perhaps it will be, so far as the health of most of those who camped here are concerned. And people were living in this dust I had driven into, in a place called the Peace Camp, the gathering place for thousands who came every spring to prepare to invade the Nevada Test Site. The particular basin we were in is sliced in half by Highway 95, and across the road, along with Skull Mountain and the Specter Range, is the Nevada Test Site, the place where the U.S. and Britain have been setting off nuclear bombs for four decades, more than 900 so far in the hot secret heart of the Arms Race.

✦ THE NEVADA TEST SITE (NTS) IS BIG ON A SCALE POSSIBLE IN few parts of the world, and in a way that only the West of the United States is big. The Test Site hewn out of Nellis Air Force Range in

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1951 is 1,350 square miles, which makes it bigger than Yosemite National Park or Rhode Island. Nellis is a little over four times as big—5,470 square miles—bigger than Connecticut, a place that approaches one of the world's smaller nations in size—Israel, say, or Belgium. And if an army were to depopulate Belgium for half a century and explode hundreds of nuclear bombs on it, people would probably notice. Yet this has happened in the Great Basin, and few Americans know it has.

Before the bombs had gone underground, the public had been more aware of the goings-on at the NTS. The flashes were many times brighter than the sun, and those who were out before dawn could see the light of atomic fission from as far away as the mountaintops of northern California and southern Idaho. Strangely colored clouds drifted east across Nevada and Utah from the predawn explosions, and pictures of mushroom clouds sometimes appeared in the news. Nearby, the bombs felt like earthquakes. Since 1963, all of the tests here have been underground, but they have still been colossal explosions and they still leak radiation into the atmosphere. Since 1963, even most antinuclear activists haven't paid much heed to the Test Site. Nuclear war, whether you are for or against it, is supposed to be a terrible thing that might happen someday, not something that has been going on all along.

*Test* is something of a misnomer when it comes to nuclear bombs. A test is controlled and contained, a preliminary to the thing itself, and though these nuclear bombs weren't being dropped on cities or strategic centers, they were full-scale explosions in the real world, with all the attendant effects. I think that rather than tests, the explosions at the Nevada Test Site were rehearsals, for a rehearsal may lack an audience but contains all the actions and actors. The physicists and bureaucrats managing the U.S. side of the Arms Race had been rehearsing the end of the world out here, over and over again.

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Even those who didn't question the legitimacy of the Arms Race sometimes questioned the necessity of testing. There were other ways to ensure the efficacy of existing nuclear weapons, and tests were only necessary for developing new weapons. The bombs set off in Nevada seemed instead a way of making war by display and displacement, as some cultures and species do—demonstrating their ability to attack rather than actually doing so. For every bomb set off in Nevada was potentially a bomb dropped on Odessa or Tashkent, and every bomb signified the government's willingness to drop a bomb on such a place, to pursue such a policy. And even if the bombs were invisible to most people in the U.S., the Soviets watched and took warning.

Other nations besides the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. had tested nuclear bombs, but only these two were rehearsing the end of the world, for they alone had developed enough bombs to annihilate not specific targets, but possibly whole continents of people and with them the natural order, the weather, perhaps the genetic codes of most living things. The bomb at Hiroshima was the end of a war, but the bombs on Tashkent and Odessa would have been the beginning of one, and the beginning of the end. The rehearsals were largely invisible, and so was the damage. Radiation is invisible, and the effects of radiation are invisible too. Although many more people are born with defects and die of cancer and other metabolic disorders in places affected by atomic fallout, the effects can only be calibrated statistically, with exhaustive research. There are already atomic epidemics, previews of what would happen to those who didn't die in an atomic war. And genetic damage—the scrambling of the codes—is as invisible as cancer, and as hard to trace to a cause. Radiation can make cells lose their memory, and loss of memory seems to be one of the cultural effects of the bombs too, for Americans forgot that bomb after bomb was being exploded here. Or per-

haps people never forgot we were testing bombs, rehearsing the end of the world, but learned it so well and so deeply that the bomb-makers no longer needed to terrorize children with bomb drills, or adults with civil defense scenarios and mushroom clouds on TV. Perhaps the bomb came to affect us all as an invisible mutation in our dreams, a drama we could watch in our sleep instead of the Nevada skies.

The Test Site was a blank on many maps, a forgotten landscape, off limits to the public and swallowed up in a state which itself seemed sometimes to be overlooked by the rest of the country. Even though Nevada is growing rapidly, its population is still not much over a million, half of it in Las Vegas and most of the rest of it in the Reno–Carson City area. There aren't many people living in all that open space, and few artists and writers have celebrated its qualities. Not very many people were displaced when the land that became Nellis was sealed off in 1941, when the population of Nevada was around 110,000, and not many people objected, because this landscape is widely thought to be worthless already.

Space itself isn't an absolute, or at least the spaciousness of landscapes isn't. Up close, aridity means that even the plants grow far apart from each other; for people and animals, this sparseness means that they too have to spread out to make a living off the land. In the East, a cow can live off a few acres of grass; out here the land is often overgrazed at only a few cows per thousand acres, and where they overgraze the soil erodes back to dust and rock. It is rock—geology—that dominates this landscape. In lush landscapes, it is as though the skin and bones of the earth are dressed in verdure; here the earth is naked, and geological processes are clearly visible. It is geological time and geological scale that dominate this landscape, dwarfing all the biological processes within the uplift of ranges, the accretion of basins. The very rocks on the ground have lain in place

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so long around the Test Site that their tops and bottoms are different colors, and any disturbance leaves a lasting scar. Every act out here has to be measured against this scale of change and scope. It is this apparent geology, this bare rock, that makes newcomers read the desert as a dead or barren landscape, though if you spend more time in it, you may come to see the earth itself lives, slowly and grandly, in the metamorphoses of geology.

✚ ABOUT HALF A MILE DOWN THE ROAD TO HIGHWAY 95, I found my little brother and eight of his friends piling into a station wagon, and when they urged me to join them, I crammed in. They were on their way down 95 to blockade the workers coming from Las Vegas to Mercury, the industrial town within the Test Site. They were merry inside the car, burbling inconsequentialities, joking, drinking out of water bottles, bota bags, and canteens, clad in Levis, flannel shirts, T-shirts advertising other actions and causes, in army surplus, bandannas, shawls, ethnic oddments, tights and thermals. That spring morning, the desert was cold. We passed the main gate to the Test Site, the gate on the road into Mercury, and kept going south. By day Mercury is a faint glimmer of dust-colored buildings five miles into the Test Site, but by night it looks like a quilt of fallen stars, the only electric light visible anywhere from the camp. These days most of the Mercury workers live in Las Vegas, and we were apparently planning on preventing them from getting to work. If there was a nuclear war going on, then there was a war against it as well, and this morning of March 30, 1990, these scruffy young people were the people who were fighting it most directly.

There were times when the conflict between government and activists became deadly serious, dangerous, even fatal for the activists,

but there were more times when it was a neatly staged conflict in which both sides played by the rules. The rules on the activists' side were first and most crucially those of nonviolent direct action, often called civil disobedience. Nonviolence means not merely refraining from violence, but of working for change without violence—which means embodying the ideal you work for. Some political theorists call it “the politics of prefiguration,” which means that it attempts to realize within the movement what it seeks to bring about on a grander scale. By making such change part of their means rather than simply their end, such activists have already begun to realize their goals, whether their action causes further change or not. Nonviolence also makes a qualitative rather than merely a strategic distinction between sides: To take violent action is to endorse violence as a means. And nonviolence disrespects violence, undermines force and might as arbiters of fate.

The theory of nonviolent direct action, first articulated in Henry David Thoreau's “Civil Disobedience,” is a noble one. The practice is far more complicated. Many religious people, notably Catholics and Quakers, commit civil disobedience with quiet fervor; a lot of anarchists and other young radicals commit civil disobedience with an insurrectionary verve that is harder to associate with Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Like civil obedience it requires a tacit cooperation with some form of governmental authority—that's the civility of it. If Thoreau hadn't let himself be hauled off to jail and hadn't stayed there (until his aunt bailed him out), he would have been a tax cheat, not a civil disobedient. Every once in a while, the governmental body in charge gets wise and doesn't show up, neutralizing the civil disobedience and diluting the impact of the demonstration. Sometimes the civil disobedients get crushed—as they were in Tiananmen Square in 1989—and the government then wins the battle,

but loses the support of the public. And sometimes the force of unarmed people in public places is enough to topple governments, as it has in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world in recent times.

Here nonviolent direct action most often gets trivialized, by the general population as well as by the media and the courts. At the trials, defense of necessity, prevention of a crime, and Nuremberg principles are almost never allowed to be introduced into court. The Thoreauvians are tried for acts stripped of political meaning—obstructing a public thoroughfare, trespassing, damaging property, although unlike criminals, nonviolent direct activists take action publicly with readiness to deal with the consequences of their acts.

Civil disobedience has a proud directness to it, unlike all the supplicatory lobbying and petitioning that somehow endorse the imbalance of power they seek to redress. People who are shocked by others who break the law and challenge the government seem to regard government as a parent, to which we owe respect and obedience (and they tend to confuse the country, which includes land and people, with the government that regulates them; “I love my country but I fear my government,” says a bumper sticker that tries to straighten out this muddle). The government is not a finished work, and it must constantly be re-created, maintained, improved, corrected for the well-being of the land and people, and in this sense it is also a child.

Then, too, those who are shocked conceive of government as an inalienable whole. But the government as an ideal—the law and the source of justice—is often distant from the government as individuals engaged in specific acts, and citizens must often choose between the ideals and the individuals. There have been many illegal government acts in recent decades, and many questionable ones. And then there are higher laws: international laws, human rights, and natural law. The right to protest by speech and public assembly is in the First

Amendment. But the need to commit it is often an issue of natural law, of adherence to an idea of justice that transcends lawbooks. And the duty to commit civil disobedience is implicit in the international laws of the Nuremberg Principles, which signal the end of obedience as an adequate form of citizenship. The Nuremberg Principles are abstracted from the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals who justified their acts as following orders, a justification the world refused to accept. "The fact that a person acted pursuant to an order of his government or of a superior does not relieve him of responsibility under international law, provided that a moral choice was in fact possible for him," says the fourth Nuremberg principle. The principles cover crimes against peace, war crimes, and crimes against humanity; the testing of nuclear weapons violates all three. These principles remove us from the shelter of authority—of doing what we do because we are told to do it—and put us in the roofless territory of individual conscience.



There's a nice symmetry between Thoreau's night in Concord jail in 1846 and the activity around the Nevada Test Site. By refusing to pay taxes, Thoreau was protesting the U.S.'s war on Mexico, which was a war for land. The land acquired through that war included Nevada and most of the Southwest, from Texas to California, though no one paid much attention to Nevada at the time; it was until 1861 part of Utah Territory anyway.

The morning after his night in jail, Thoreau took a group of his fellow citizens out huckleberrying.

✚ ABOUT THREE DOZEN PEOPLE TOOK OVER THE TWO NORTH-bound lanes of Highway 95, which is a divided road as it approaches

the Test Site. Luxury cruiser buses full of Test Site workers, pickups, Winnebagos, and four-wheel drives began to back up for blocks, then for half a mile. The arrests that began at seven that morning were rowdy. Activists were expected to wander into the Test Site, but not into oncoming traffic, so the sheriffs, thick and red-faced in tight, shortsleeved uniforms the same color as the dust, were irate. Most of the people sitting in the road used passive resistance—they didn't struggle, but they didn't cooperate with the people arresting them. They had to be carried off the road. Some of them entwined arms with each other and then linked their own hands beneath their knees, making a human chain. This was a surprise action and there was no place to take the blockaders away to until requisitioned buses came, so the handcuffed activists were put down by the side of the highway.

The crowd on the road thinned and the crowd by its shoulder thickened, then everyone suddenly rushed back onto the road and sat down again. Supporters standing on the gravelly freeway divider yelled at the sheriffs to treat the blockaders with care whenever they saw an arm being twisted or a body being dragged instead of carried. Other than these cries of care, it was as silent as a pantomime. Only rarely did a stopped car honk, a protester or sheriff speak. There was no way I was going to get arrested until after I had a cup of coffee, so I just watched. All the shadows that filled the hollows of the mountains were gone, chased out by the rising sun, and the landscape already had the flat, stark brightness of midday. As I watched the burly men picking up blockaders by arms and legs stiff with resistance, I saw their frail forms as *bodies*, as potential corpses and as pathetically vulnerable objects to put between the landscape and the military, and my eyes filled with tears.

Finally, the buses came and took all the handcuffed people away, including my little brother. (I fell into calling him that to distinguish

him from all the other Davids, and all my other brothers, and I should add that he has been a little over six feet for the last decade or so, though he was smaller than me once.) He is an anarchist, and a key organizer for the antinuclear movement, and though he was initially an anarchist in the sense that innumerable punks were in the eighties, he has read his Bakunin and Kropotkin and is now very seriously an anarchist. Anarchy, I should explain, means not the lack of order but of hierarchy, a direct and absolute democracy. Voting democracy, as anarchists point out, simply allows a majority to impose its will on a minority and is not necessarily participatory or direct. They themselves continue the process of negotiation until all participants achieve consensus, until everyone—not merely a majority—has arrived at a viable decision. Anarchy proper usually works out to mean excruciatingly interminable meetings, rather than the mayhem the word evokes in most American imaginations. The Peace Camp and American Peace Test, which organized the camp and the actions, were run on anarchist lines: Each affinity group—the basic organizing unit of direct action—deliberated over the issues and then sent a spokesperson to represent its decisions at a spokescouncil.

During the Spanish Civil War, the writer Sylvia Townsend Warner once said of anarchy—the prevailing ideology of the Spanish antifascists—that “the world was not yet worthy of it, but it ought to be the politics of heaven.” During the season that the movie *Reds* came out, my little brother, then still a teenager living at home, was so inspired by John Reed’s extravagant Bohemian anarchy in the early part of the century that he imitated him, tacking a sign to our mother’s front door that said, “Property is theft; walk right in,” an ideal he put on hold when he moved to the city. I myself am not yet worthy of anarchy, or at least I have never found the patience and tolerance necessary to work with group consensus for extended pe-

riods. During the several years we both lived in San Francisco, however, my brother and I worked out a beautiful symbiosis: He was much better at going to meetings, and I was much better at spelling, so he organized, and I pitched in on the publication projects he took on and showed up for the demonstrations. Occasionally, like Thoreau's aunt, I paid his bail.

So many Americans seem to think that activism is an aberrant necessity brought on by a unique crisis, and then throw themselves into it with an unsustainable energy brought on by the belief that once they realize some goal or other, they can go home and be apolitical again. I always admired my brother for the steady nonchalance with which he approached his work, recognizing that political engagement was a normal and permanent state, and because however much he idealized direct action and populism, he never lost his ability to see the ludicrous aspects of the movement. He was the force that got me to Nevada the first time, though it was the desert and the bomb that kept me coming back again and again.



After the bus pulled away, I went back to camp and pitched my tent beside three yuccas and crawled inside. Around noon I stuck my head out and looked up into the sky, which had filled with clouds while I slept. Rain fell straight into my eyes, a few light drops in a shower that lasted only a minute or so, and left the landscape as dry as before. I took out my water bottle and stove and made coffee, sitting in the door of my tent, bemused by the reduction of my domesticity to a bagful of gear, my privacy to a tube of ripstop nylon, to find myself drinking coffee in solitude in the middle of all the bustle of the camp surrounded by all the silence of the desert. That utter abstraction the Arms Race and its sister the Cold War only be-

came believable for me when they acquired a location, a landscape: this landscape. This was the place where the end of the world had been rehearsed since 1951, and this was my third spring at the camp. We were living closer to nuclear war than anyone but its technicians and its victims, which should have been devastating, but we were doing something about it, which was heartening.

The present large-scale actions had begun in earnest a few years earlier. An annual Lenten vigil had been held out here since 1977—a remarkable Franciscan nun named Sister Rosemary had initiated it—and the spring actions had grown over the years, bringing together Quakers and other religious denominations with the Franciscans, then nonreligious activists (and pagans). Around the equinoxes was the only time most people could bear to live out in the desert at all, because the heat of summer and cold of winter were both fierce. Even in spring, the nights could be freezing and the days could climb into the nineties. Secular antinuclear activists decided that it was time to turn to the very heart of the Arms Race and held a thirty-day protest out here in 1985, organized by the direct-action task force of the national nuclear freeze movement. When the movement decided to quit sponsoring direct action, the task force split off into American Peace Test, the central organization in coordinating the mass actions since. This year, 1990, attendance was down a little, probably because so many Americans took the peaceful changes in the Eastern Bloc countries as a sign that everything would turn out all right without their participation. The Cold War, popular wisdom had it, was thawing. France had said it would stop testing if the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. did, and forty-one nations were clamoring for a comprehensive test ban treaty at the 1991 U.N. conference. And the U.S. was testing, despite the moratoriums of the U.S.S.R., and so we were here.

✚ ON A FEW OCCASIONS, PEOPLE ACTUALLY STOPPED NUCLEAR tests. Most people hadn't the stamina or conviction to do more than a ritual act of civil disobedience, a symbolic interference with the Arms Race, but some had walked to Ground Zero and prevented tests from taking place. Walking to Ground Zero meant carrying seventy-pound packs with gallons of water, walking by night and sleeping in gullies and mesa shadows by day, for three days or so. In 1986 a Greenpeace team showed up at Ground Zero and disrupted a scheduled test, but the team's announcement and photograph hardly made the news when it rushed them out over the wire services. In 1988, a woman walked to an observation tower at Ground Zero and locked her neck to a steel pole there. The precautionary guidelines American Peace Test published for such actions were terrifying in themselves: "The Nevada Test Site is a highly radioactive place with many hot spots, dumps, and storage areas. . . . There is little that can be done to protect your body from beta and gamma rays which are unseen and penetrate your body. Alpha particles, however, may have more longterm effects. They are found on dust particles that can be breathed in or ingested. Cover your face when walking in the wind. Do not eat food dropped on the ground. Don't use bare, dirty hands for eating. . . . A large test can throw someone three meters into the air at Ground Zero and kill them. There is a rippling of ground motion that goes out from this center. Detonations create limited earthquakes. The Nellis Air Force Base surrounds the Test Site on the east, west and north. Depending on which part you venture through, you will have to deal with ammunition strafing, falling bombs, unexploded bombs on the ground, maneuvering around targets, and Stealth bomber security. At the time of arrest, it is vital that team members make no sudden moves that might be considered threatening to the security forces. They are

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very well armed and quite capable of shooting if they feel threatened.”

A lot of people hadn't gone all the way to Ground Zero, but had reached surprisingly far into the Test Site. Some Western Shoshone people had simply disregarded the fences and signs and continued to walk across the land, visit traditional sites, and hunt and gather on it during the decades after its withdrawal from the public domain in 1941, and Pauline Esteves, an elder from the Timbisha Shoshone community in Death Valley, remembers her uncle going deer hunting there in the 1940s. Presumably the place where all our nuclear weapons are tested should be a major national security area, but the government has always counted on the remoteness of the place and indifference of the people to shield its actions. In practice this place was liable to be overrun at any time, was an area without much security at all, even against a bunch of loosely organized pacifists.



The night that I first got arrested at the Test Site, something else happened there. I didn't hear the real story until years later, when I was driving one of the participants back from Nevada to San Francisco—another all-night drive on the route that had become a roster of familiar landmarks. On the last leg of the journey, past the white windmills of Altamont Pass and down through Livermore, California, where nuclear bombs are designed and the H-bomb was conceived, as daybreak came like a postcard in my rearview mirror, Rachel told me about the Princesses of Plutonium. The year before, at the Mother's Day 1987 action, two of the future Princesses had succeeded in reaching Mercury and had been cited and released with everyone else, and somehow going to Mercury became their goal. They talked about what they could do when they got there.

Rachel came up with the mask she had been using for another project, so they all acquired expressionless silvery robotic masks and white paper coveralls that looked like radiation suits.

At night, after the big arrest action in 1988, the Princesses of Plutonium took off for Mercury. "And we really were princesses. We travelled in comfort, with thermoses of coffee and tea and chocolate-covered espresso beans, and every time we had to hide, we had a little snack," Rachel recalled. They took a leisurely approach to the forbidden city, hiding and refreshing themselves frequently during the night. The last time they thought they were seen, they hid in a ditch, and during that halt they donned their rad suits and masks and waited, then climbed a fence at the eastern side of Mercury and began to walk around. "And we were there for a long time, ten of us, in the early morning on a Sunday, we stuck together and we put up stickers and things: We were really visible and we couldn't believe we were just free to walk around. Finally a Wackenhut came up, a red-faced senior guy I see at the cattleguard all the time now, and I'll never forget how shocked and scared he looked. He couldn't tell by looking if we were men or women or what.

"And they took us into custody and interviewed each of us alone for a long time. They were pretty cool; we all gave our name as Priscilla, after a particularly dirty balloon-dropped nuclear test in 1957, and the interviewer was saying that it certainly was a coincidence that there were so many of us with that name. Then they took us to Beatty, and we started to have problems. Some of the people who had never been arrested before were really scared, and got upset at others for leading them into this. They took us to jail and kept us till Tuesday [from Saturday]. We had to give our real names then; they took away our possessions and clothes, gave us jail uniforms, the works. But the peace camp was great. They came and did support actions outside the jail and some men went to Mercury in solidarity

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with us, and we could yell and sing at them in the jail. I tried to drink as little water as possible because the water there's really radioactive. When we got home, things started to fall apart with the Princesses. There was disagreement on how to handle the case and things. We worked on it for months, and then they dropped the charges."



Priscilla exploded on June 24, 1957, fifth in the Plumbbob series of twenty-four large bombs. Unlike most Test Site bombs, this one was set off in the southeast corner of the Test Site, at Frenchman Flat, a few miles north of Mercury. Near Ground Zero were live pigs dressed in specially tailored military uniforms to test the fabrics' abilities to protect against thermal radiation. The explosion was bigger than expected, and the remote-control camera captured the pigs writhing and squealing as they died in what proved to be a pointlessly cruel exercise. Slightly further away were soldiers in trenches, one of whom wrote an account of Priscilla. Marine Lieutenant Thomas Saffer wrote, "A thundrous rumble like the sound of thousands of stampeding cattle passed directly overhead, pounding the trench line. Accompanying the roar was an intense pressure that pushed me downward. The shock wave was traveling at nearly four hundred miles per hour, pushed toward us by the immense energy of the explosion. The earth began to gyrate violently, and I could not control my body. Overcome by fear, I opened my eyes. I saw that I was being showered with dust, dirt, rocks, and debris so thick that I could not see four feet in front of me. . . . A light many times brighter than the sun penetrated the thick dust, and I imagined that some evil force was attempting to swallow my body and soul. . . . The metallic taste in my mouth was foul and would not go away." The Plumbbob tests dropped fallout from Oregon to New England.

✚ I CAME TO THE TEST SITE FOUR SPRINGS IN A ROW, AND THE third spring, the spring of 1990, the place began to make sense to me. The first year, the afternoon before the Princesses set out, I walked with friends into the arms of the waiting guards. We had simply climbed through the fence a short distance away from the road entrance to the place, and they had come to get us. The boundary of the site is marked by a barbed-wire fence, and the point at which one is trespassing on the road is the far side of the cattleguard (cattleguard, easterners and urbanites: a set of thick bars running the length of a trench across the road, easy for human feet to cross by stepping on the bars but impossibly treacherous for hooves). It seems typically Western that all the Test Site boundaries are designed to obstruct livestock rather than people, for no serious walker is halted by a cattleguard in the road or a fence across the land.

My second year at the Test Site I went in with a bunch of anarchist women from San Francisco and Seattle. Two of the northerners became friends of mine later, but I didn't know any of them well at the time. We'd agreed that we would pair off so that no one got abandoned or left at the guards' mercy without a witness, and then we'd hiked northwest up 95 about a mile north of the main gate, so that we'd have time to cover some ground before we were interfered with. I'm not sure what our purpose was—curiosity?—but my own desire was always to walk as long as possible across the land that was off limits. "Reclaim the Test Site," the big American Peace Test action of spring 1988 had been called. Walking claims land not by circumscribing it and fencing it off as property but by moving across it in a line that however long or short connects it to the larger journey of one's life, the surrounding roads and trails, that makes it part of the web of experience, confirmed by every foot that touches the earth.

Actually, that spring afternoon in 1989 the dozen other women

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and I only got about a quarter mile in, walking in a gully that made it hard to see us from the land, before the helicopters found us, swooping low overhead with men in paramilitary uniforms leaning out ready to jump. If we were conducting our war as a picnic meander, they were conducting their job as a military maneuver. But when the hovering copter got low enough to pelt us with gravel spat from the ground by its gust of air, we ran, and the men leapt out and ran after us. I ran madly in the bad footing of the desert, with its soft patches of sand and crusted-over dust, cobbled stretches, boulders, loose rocks, and low bushes, only slowing down enough to keep pace with the woman with whom I'd paired off. The anarchists were all wearing vivid colors, and I in my dusty khaki regretted that we were so visible. I wondered this time, as I did so many others, whether I could disappear from view if I walked by myself, but solitude was discouraged here—it could be dangerous.

I ran for a ways without looking back, and then I turned my head a little and saw a man in camouflage all but close enough to grab me, far closer than I expected. He must have decided to join another chase, because it seems unlikely that I actually outran him. And running was one of the things that we usually agreed not to do, as it wasn't in keeping with the spirit of nonviolent direct action. Urgent, unpredictable, quick actions threw the security forces into a panic, made it possible for things to go astray.

I gave up easily, letting them handcuff my hands behind my back, but my companion resisted, letting the two guards know why she was here and by what laws she had the right to be here. She cited the fact that the land was stolen from the Western Shoshone in the first place, and that we had permission from them to be here, that she was following the Nuremberg Principles they were violating. Now I can't even remember which of the women she was, only the unwavering conviction with which she refused to cooperate. She re-

fused to walk, too, and so they herded the two of us into another gully and handcuffed us ankle to ankle. One stood guard over us while the other went for reinforcements. The other women were no longer visible. Picture an immensity of flatness populated only by two immobilized women and two men in camouflage, one of whom was rapidly disappearing. There was nothing to say. The Test Site looked exactly like the landscape outside, though we were now unable to stand up in it because of our shackles.

The second guard came back with a third man. While one guard walked behind me to make sure that I didn't attempt to flee, the other two picked her up, each taking one arm and one leg, and carried her. We progressed a couple of hundred yards in this way, when an older, red-faced guard joined our group of five. He snarled at the guards not to indulge her by carrying her. First he got them to drag her by her arms, then he got them to stop going around the obstacles. They began to drag her through thornbushes and over cacti.

He had convinced them to engage in a mild form of torture, and it didn't seem to have occurred to any of them that they could refuse his orders, though it was this kind of mindless obedience that the Nuremberg Principles she cited were made to combat. Finally she gave up and, near tears, asked them to stop. She began to walk, so she wouldn't be dragged. We walked to the dirt road that ran parallel to the Test Site periphery, where a big van was waiting for us, along with several of the other women in our group. The van was there to take us to the huge holding pens the Department of Energy had built a year or so before, next to the main gate. The guards cut off the plastic handcuffs we were bound with and rehandcuffed us with our hands in front, letting the cut pairs lie where they fell. My companion offered me a drink of water from the bota bag they hadn't confiscated, then she took off her hiking boot with awkward double-handed gestures and took out her Swiss army knife. I pulled

out as many of the thorns in her foot as I could with the knife's tweezers. Some of them were huge, and one long one broke off deep in her foot.

✚ I HAVE TROUBLE WITH THE ABSTRACT AND THE CONCRETE. IN the abstract we were committing civil disobedience in the cause of peace and justice, making a gesture that echoed the gestures of Thoreau in Concord in 1846 and the trials in Nuremberg in 1946, the resistance of the Shoshone and of pacifists in many places and times. In the concrete we were scrabbling around in the scrub, playing tag with a bunch of mercenaries who thought that we were completely demented. My faith wavers. I always had trouble seeing the guards as representatives of U.S. military policy rather than as rednecks with limited career options, though I think many of the activists at the Test Site had the opposite problem, that perhaps the concrete didn't complicate their abstract ideals. The invisible background to all this, to our plastic handcuffs, to the thorn that broke off in her foot, to the helicopter pelting gravel and the men making a living by wearing camouflage and chasing pacifists, to the whole ramshackle peace camp and direct action, the background we would never see, was even harder to keep in mind: huge nuclear weapons detonations in preparation for international wars and as part of a local nuclear war nearing the forty-year mark.

There is a theory about lines of energy that traverse the earth, running through sacred sites, called "ley lines." The people who have developed this theory demonstrate it by showing the alignment of important sites along straight lines. I'm not sure about ley lines, but I believe in lines of convergence. These lines are no more visible in the landscape than ley lines, and I am not even proposing that they have any existence at all outside our imaginations—

which are themselves crucial territories. These lines of convergence are the lines of biography and history and ecology that come together at a site, as the history of nuclear physics, the Arms Race, anti-Communism, civil disobedience, Native American land-rights struggles, the environmental movement, and the mysticism and fanaticism deserts seem to inspire in Judeo-Christians all come together to make the Nevada Test Site, not as a piece of physical geography, but of cultural geography, not merely in the concrete, but in the abstract. Such places bring together histories which may seem unrelated—and when they come together it becomes possible to see new connections in our personal and public histories and stories, collisions even. A spiderweb of stories spreads out from any place, but it takes time to follow the strands.

There's a strangely popular subject of speculation for hikers and explorers: whether they were the first people ever to tread on a piece of land. It comes out of the American obsession with virgin wilderness, which is itself a deeply problematic idea, and it speculates about the possibility of the utterly new, of an experience without predecessors. It is usually mistaken in its premises. There are few places in North America that were not first walked upon by the indigenous inhabitants of the continent, and even if one were to take out one's mountaineering gear and reach a peak literally untouched before by human beings, one is making a gesture that depends for its meaning and motives on a long history of such gestures. Though you may be the first to climb a peak in the Sierra and your foot may touch a place no human foot has touched, you are covering cultural territory covered by great mountaineers from Clarence King and John Muir onward. And the actual act of climbing a mountain depends for its meaning on the romantic cult of mountains, and so even if you have never read Shelley's "Mont Blanc," you have inherited it, and when you step on that piece of ground, you step

where Shelley went, and where a wide road of meaning has been worn since. You may not know that the Italian poet Petrarch was the first modern man who climbed a mountain for the pleasure of the view, but you are treading in his six-hundred-year-old footsteps. New or old, it seems you should know where you came from to understand where you are, and only a true and absolute amnesiac could come from nowhere in arriving somewhere. We all carry the burden of history and desire; sometimes it's good to sit down and open the suitcases.

I want to be able to see the history of gestures behind even a voyage into the new, and I want more to be able to remember the lines of convergence that lead to a place like the Nevada Test Site. This is the abstract whose weight I have tried to feel behind every concrete gesture at the Test Site, a place that however few may see it, however invisible it may be, is the hub of so many crucial lines of our history. But it was hard to remember all this while pulling thorns out of someone's sweaty foot with my hands cuffed together.

✚ HOWEVER FOOLISH AND FUTILE THIS ANTINUCLEAR ACTIVISM seemed close up, at a distance it commanded respect. Maybe it was an accident that we helped inspire an extraordinarily successful movement on the other side of the globe, and maybe it wasn't. The fact remains that on February 12 and 17, 1989, underground nuclear tests vented radiation into the atmosphere in Kazakhstan, the central Asian republic where the Soviets tested most of their nuclear weapons and where the environment and human health had suffered terribly from radiation over the decades. And on February 27, the Kazakh poet Olzhas Suleimenov appeared live on television and instead of reading his poetry as scheduled, he read a statement condemning nuclear testing and calling for a public meeting. The

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next day 5,000 people came to the Hall of the Writers Union in Alma Ata, the Kazakh capital, and named themselves the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement, in solidarity with the antinuclear and indigenous activists of Nevada—an extraordinary line of convergence running from test site to test site halfway round the globe.

Local officials were members of this movement, along with distinguished professionals and many, many writers. On the confident assumption that the Test Site activists had the same kind of entrenchment in local institutions, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Antinuclear Movement sent statements of solidarity to Nevada government officials, who must have been bemused to find that Communists thought they had a lot in common. In October, two huge Soviet tests triggered demonstrations of tens of thousands of Kazakhs, the republic's miners threatened to go on strike, and more than a million people signed the Nevada-Semipalatinsk statement opposing nuclear testing. However bleak the political situation, the culture was enviable, one in which a poet had such power and the public could join together so effectively. By October 21, 1989, the Soviets had stopped testing, begun a unilateral moratorium, and agreed to close the sites down altogether by the mid-nineties.

The people of the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement had timing on their side, of course. They began in the midst of the reforms sweeping the Soviet Union, when the nation was in fragile condition, when all things nuclear still recalled the meltdown at Chernobyl for most Soviet citizens, when civil disobedience and public demonstration had become a powerful new tool for them and for Eastern Europeans. Kazakhs would say, "We realized nuclear testing was bad, and so we demanded that our government stop it, and so they did. We don't understand why you don't do the same thing." Then the U.S. activists would try to explain the military-industrial com-

plex, the sabotage of democracy by money politics, and the way that the U.S. government has successfully ignored popular protest, realizing that trivialization and obliviousness are its most effective weapons, the way the media overlooked us and everything else that took place in the state of Nevada.

That year, 1989, the year of the cactus thorns and of Suleimenov's statement, law-enforcement officials arrested 1,090 people for trespassing in one fell swoop, unloaded us into the special cattle pen they'd built for us, left us there with a canister of water and a portable toilet for the afternoon, then loaded us onto buses. They used the same buses for us that they used to transport the workers from their homes in Las Vegas to Mercury, air-conditioned coaches with tinted windows, reclinable seats, even toilets. It was a peculiar experience, sitting on the soft upholstery provided by the Department of Energy, watching the scenery roll by at sixty or seventy miles an hour on the way up 95. My first year there, 1988, they'd taken all 1,200 of us nearly 200 miles north to the remote town of Tonopah, and I had worried that they wouldn't take us that far unless they planned on hanging onto us for a while. It was a long enough ride, on that strange road as the sun set, to imagine many things. But every year they just hauled us north to inconvenience us, unloaded us a few buses at a time, snipped off our cuffs, and told us to go away and not come back. (Usually we were dumped in Beatty—"gateway to Death Valley"—a former mining boomtown that had restaurants with fingerbowls and tuxedoed waiters in 1906, but was more of a corn-dog kind of place by my time, and was the town where the Princesses had been held.) By the end of the ten-day event in 1988, 2,000 people had been arrested from among the 5,000 participants—and no charges were pressed in the vast majority of the cases. It was one of the biggest civil disobedience arrests in U.S. history, and it barely made the local news.

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In 1988, the nuclear bombs exploded at the Test Site were named Kernville, Abeline, Schellbourne, Laredo, Comstock, Rhyolite, Nightingale, Alamo, Kearsage, Bullfrog, Dahlhart, and Misty Echo. Most of them ranged from 20 to 150 kilotons (Hiroshima was laid waste with 15 kilotons, Nagasaki with 21), as did 1989's bombs: Texarkana, Kawich, Ingot, Palisade, Tulia, Contact, Amarillo, Disko Elm, Hornitos, Muleshoe, Barnwell, and Whiteface. They didn't make the news either.

✚ THE REASONS WHY WE DIDN'T GET MORE SEVERE TREATMENT had to do with money and land. The land of the Nevada Test Site is itself under considerable dispute. The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), which operates the Test Site, has an agreement whereby the Nye County authorities are responsible for legal aspects of the security of the site. It's supposed to have been a tradeoff for the economic benefits of having a major employer in the county. But Nye, the second largest county in the U.S., has a population in the low ten thousands, and though the DOE subsidizes Nye County sheriffs arresting activists, it doesn't pay the county to put activists through the legal system. So every year they've rounded us up and hauled us away and tossed us out with a reprimand or two: As long as they don't prosecute us, we serve as an additional light seasonal income for the county, rather than a burden on it. It resembles a cattle roundup more than a criminal arrest process, what with the quantity of people, the logistics of large-scale cuffing and busing, and the general lack of animosity between parties. Some people said that Nye was trying to annoy the DOE into patrolling its own premises by letting us off so lightly.

The land shouldn't really be controlled by any of these authorities, however—local, state, or federal—because legally the Nevada

Test Site is part of a much larger expanse that never really became part of the United States. U.S. claim to the land is based on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the 1848 treaty by which the U.S. concluded its war with Mexico, the war Thoreau went to jail to protest. It was that treaty, and a \$15 million sweetener, which transformed northwestern Mexico into the southwestern states of the United States, from western Texas and New Mexico to California. What was then called Utah Territory was of little concern to either side at the time. Utah was named after the Utes, a linguistic and cultural subgroup of one of the continent's major indigenous groups, the Shoshonean people. From the Wyoming Rockies to the Sierra, and from Idaho to California's Mojave, tribes including the Western and Mountain Shoshone, Bannock, Utes, and Northern and Southern Paiutes lived for centuries before the first Mormons and mountain men wandered in. It was a Wind River Shoshone woman, Sacajawea, who with her newborn baby in her arms led Lewis and Clark on their journey across the continent in 1805–1806 to find a way to the Pacific and to begin the national imagining of a sea-to-sea United States. And it was Shoshonean peoples who learned how to live within the severe limits and delicate balances of the Great Basin, who made it a home and named its places long before Fremont and the Death Valley Forty-Niners applied the morbid appellations of their eastern imaginations to the place.

*Nevada* means snowy, a sign that Nevada was settled from the western, Sierran side, and it only became a separate territory, and a territory settled by non-Mormon whites, when it turned out that Nevada was full of gold and silver. Much of Nevada still belongs to the Western Shoshone. The Western Shoshone do not believe that land can be sold, and they have never sold their land. Nor have they given it away, or leased it, or been conquered as a nation by the nation of the United States; for all intents and purposes, they have never ceded

their land, and nothing has superseded the treaty they signed with the U.S. in 1863 (and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo also asserts that prior land ownership would be respected by the new government). Called the Treaty of Ruby Valley, for the lush region in north-eastern Nevada where it was signed, it describes the vast expanse of the Western Shoshone Nation and states the terms by which the Shoshone might cede their land and become reservation Indians. The reservations and other treaty terms were never met, however, and the Shoshone never ceded their land, and they are still fighting for their right to it today. The federal government has admitted their legal ownership of the land to the extent of trying to force the Shoshone to accept payment for it, but the paltry sum allocated still sits in a Department of the Interior bank account, where it has more than doubled since the government granted itself permission to purchase the land in the 1970s. And the Nevada Test Site is in the southwestern corner of the 43,000 square miles of the nation the Western Shoshone call *Newe Sogobia*, and nuclear testing, along with many other military and industrial assaults on the environment, violates Shoshone religious beliefs. So the Shoshone have become active in the international struggle against nuclear testing, and they issue permits to be on their land, and one of the pleasant things that can be said to one's arresting officer is that he, in fact, is the one who is trespassing.



There's something profoundly American about getting arrested at the Nevada Test Site: The very issues are, not cowboys and Indians, but land, war technology, apocalypse, Thoreauvian civil disobedience, bureaucratic obscurity, and Indians, part of the great gory mess of how we will occupy this country, whose questions are as unsettling as its land is unsettled. Then, of course, after being un-

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handcuffed and thrown out, the obvious thing to do is to celebrate, which in Beatty means going to one of the diner-cum-casinos for drinks and American food. To start the day in the deadly cold of a desert morning, sitting on rocks and drinking coffee, to fill one's water bottle and mill around with friends and acquaintances as the day gradually creeps toward hotness, to sit through a sometimes stirring and often dull rally of speeches and music (folk to punk and back again), to commit the fairly abstract act of climbing under a wire fence that separates the rocky expanse of cactus and creosote bushes from the rocky expanse of creosote bushes and cactus, to be confronted by hired help in the wrong-colored camouflage (as though they, not we, had a use for stealth), to go through numerous pairs of disposable plastic handcuffs as we captives are rearranged, to idle in a sort of cattle pen built just for us, to be escorted after many hours in the sun into a special luxury bus and be given a tour of scenic Highway 95, to be interrogated by hard-faced sheriffettes with piles of teased hair who are irritated by anyone who wants to give a more complicated name than Jane Doe or Shoshone Guest, to be tossed out into a small town, to catch up on one's friends' well-being and head for fast food and ice cream in the middle of the night, to plunk quarters into slot machines while waiting for the food to come, winning the occasional handful of change, to retrace the pointless route as the liberated activists get driven back to the camp, to wander back through the rocks and thorns in the dark to a sleeping bag on hard, uneven ground under a sky more full of stars than almost anyplace else in the world—could anything be more redolent of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

✚ AND IN 1990 I GOT COWBOYS. FRIDAY AFTERNOON THE arrested roadblockers started to trickle back into camp and the

workshops began. Every action included a day of workshops on issues relevant to the action, from the philosophy of nonviolence to the physics of radiation. I chose a workshop on Nevada and the military, which was scheduled to meet on a rise between two administration-center tents that afternoon, and when I got there I turned out to be the only one who cared about such concrete, local things. The workshop came with a lot of maps of Nevada, and it was given by an exuberant young Nevadan named Bob Fulkerson, who wore a Stetson hat over his strawberry-blond hair and spoke with a drawling verve. He had been for some years the executive director of Citizen Alert, a statewide group "working for public participation and government accountability in issues of concern to Nevadans," according to its mission statement, really a political group out to save the Nevada environment from the depredations of water-greedy cities, apocalyptic military technology, mining, and the indifferent administration of federal bureaucrats.

Bob is a fifth-generation Anglo-Nevadan, rare in a state that had no settled white population halfway through the last century; and one of his relations rode with the Jesse James Gang on its last holdup. A hellraiser with high ideals, he told horror stories without piety or grief, but with a cheerful hostility that made it clear he relishes his work. He told me stories about Nevada and the military all afternoon. In the course of them, I began to pick up the jargon: the DOE, MOAs (Military Operations Areas), FONSI (findings of no significant interest), Secret Area 51, the Bravo 16 Bombing Range, the contamination of NTS Area 25, the proposed tank range at Tonopah Gunnery Range, the 1,389 live bombs and 123,375 tons of scrap ordnance picked up on public land by a Navy explosive team in what was called "Operation Ugly Baby." One story that stuck with me was about Dixie Valley in central Nevada, where the Navy decided to test sonic booms close over the inhabitants' heads, until

finally it succeeded in driving them out, buying their homes for a pittance and burning them to the ground. Bob told me about a woman who used to raise thoroughbreds in Dixie Valley and works in a laundromat now. And he told me about nearby Yucca Mountain, slated to become the nation's first permanent high-level nuclear waste repository, the Groom Range to the east of us, and the Sheahans who had been on the Groom Range for four generations. As we talked a dust devil ripped through camp, picking up hundreds of Shoshone guest permits—small white slips of paper—and spinning them fifty feet into the air. Then it lifted a huge black tarp and carried it over the camp, flapping loudly and looking like a pterodactyl. Its shadow crept across people, cars, and land, growing and shrinking like a separate creature as the tarp's altitude changed.



In the 1890s, the Sheahans began mining in the Groom Range, an area in southern central Nevada that has never had much of a white population. They stayed there for generations, mining silver and lead above Groom Dry Lake. An independent-spirited woman named Margaret Long, who spent much of the 1930s exploring the California-Nevada desert and tracing the routes of the Death Valley Forty-Niners, visited the Sheahans in what must have been the early years of that decade: "The Sheahan family was waiting with true desert hospitality to welcome the strangers whose car they had watched emerging from the mysterious distance across the great dry lake. They provided a fine supper, during which we listened to the radio. Across the same wilderness through which exhausted emigrants had steered this chartless course in 1849 came a distant discussion of the Boulder Dam bill from the Senate in Washington."

Two decades later, when Boulder Dam had backed up the waters of the wild Colorado dozens of miles and generated the electricity

that lit the casinos of Vegas, another guest showed up on the Sheahan doorstep. The polite man from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC)—a more candid name for what is now the DOE—said that there would be some testing going on to the west, at Yucca Flat, in what had been Nellis Air Force Range since 1941. The family then consisted of Dan, who had inherited the mine from his father, his wife, Martha, and their sons, Pat and Bob; and the mine—now solely a lead mine—had just been improved with the construction of a hundred-thousand-dollar concentration mill. The Sheahans stayed. Before dawn on February 2, 1951, their house shook, the front door burst open, and several windows broke. An 8-kiloton nuclear bomb—about half the size of that dropped on Hiroshima six years before—had just been dropped on Yucca Flat. Code-named Baker-2, it was the fourth in the Ranger series of five nuclear weapons—the fifth, a 22-kiloton bomb, would explode four days later.

In September of 1951, several months after atomic testing began in Nevada, a delegation of AEC men arrived and told the Sheahans that there was some danger from radioactive fallout. They said that women and children should leave during nuclear tests, and gave Dan Sheahan monitoring equipment with which to sample the effects of the blasts. The fallout clouds kept coming, like rainstorms sweeping over the valley, except that dust rather than water fell. The Sheahans began to see cattle with silver-dollar-sized white spots on their backs, found dead animals with the same white spots, and noticed the wildlife becoming scarcer. Dan Sheahan once spoke of encountering a herd of horses that wandered east onto the Sheahan lands with their eyes burnt out, left empty sockets by a blast.

All the tests took place when the winds were supposed to be easterly or northeasterly, because there were fewer people in that direction than any other. West of the Test Site is Los Angeles, south of it is Las Vegas, northeast of it, closer than any other permanent dwell-

ing at that time, was the Groom Mine. During 1951 and 1952 the Sheahans continued their friendly relations with the AEC men who showed up to take the radiation samples and tell them when further tests would be conducted. In 1953, the Air Force began strafing the property with planes. That summer, while the family was having lunch, a high-explosive incendiary bomb hit the mill and blew it up.

Dan and Martha Sheahan died of cancer. They never told anyone about the bombing, because they were still trying to get along with the Air Force, though the photographs of the shattered mill have been published since. Their sons continued to try to work the mine. In early 1984 Pat Sheahan was driving to it when he ran into a roadblock. Armed men from the DOE and the Air Force told him that the land had been closed to the public “for national security reasons.” That spring the Air Force claimed 89,000 acres of Nevada public land—144 square miles—and put it off limits to ranchers, miners, hunters, and anyone else who came along. The Groom Mine was in the middle of this vast chunk of Bureau of Land Management land, and neither the private nor the public land had been taken legally. Any parcel over 5,000 acres has to be withdrawn from the public domain by an act of Congress, but Congress only gave the seizure a meek and retroactive blessing with a four-year authorization. In hearings, an Air Force official acknowledged that the decision had been made “at the Secretary of the Air Force level or higher,” meaning that the Secretary of Defense or then-President Reagan had authorized it. The Sheahans and a rancher were given permission to enter the now-restricted area, but they could no longer work their mine, since they couldn’t bring anyone with them. The withdrawal was supposed to make a national security area more secure by preventing anyone from peeking into Nellis proper—it was a buffer zone, a zone of invisibility.

On June 15, 1988, the Congressional authorization expired, and

on June 16 the withdrawal was extended, but during the hours when the land was public again Citizen Alert staffer Grace Bukowski and Nevada physician-activist Richard Barga entered the Groom Range and staked mining claims. The Mining Law of 1872 allows mining to preempt all other activities on public land and allows anyone who stakes a claim to develop it. Theoretically, then, the two claimstakers had mounted a significant obstacle to closing off the lands again—which was their intention. On July 29, Grace, Bob Fulkerson, and two other activists came out to the Groom Range to mark the claims' borders. A helicopter monitored them as they moved across public land, and at 10:00 p.m., when they crossed the Air Force boundary line, heavily armed commandos surrounded them.

The part of the story that Bob left out, Grace told me later. While they were surrounded by invisible soldiers, Bob began to sing, and he held off the troops for an hour and a half by singing songs about Nevada—"And he never sang the same one twice," Grace said. She could see one soldier because his teeth gleamed in the darkness as he laughed. Finally, they surrendered, were taken to the tiny town of Alamo, cited for trespass, and released.

The Groom Range land is now part of Nellis, and insulates Secret Area 51 against public scrutiny. Although outrage over the appropriation of the tract has died down, another interest has arisen: UFO believers claim that the area is home for the "Black Project," a secretive, illicit program which tests alien aircraft and devices including antimatter reactors, gravity waves, and flying saucers. The tiny town of Rachel has a flourishing restaurant-bar called the Little A-le-Inn, which caters to those who make the pilgrimage to this remote site in hope of a glimpse of alien spacecraft. The area is patrolled by Wackenhuts, the same private security guards that patrol the Test Site.

Bob didn't delve into the UFO lore on Area 51. He was suffi-

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ciently preoccupied by earthly use of the land, and his story about the Groom Range ended with the 1988 mining-claim occupation. In 1990 he and Grace were still waiting to be tried, and they had offered to suspend their right to develop the mining claims for fifteen years if the Defense Department would add civilians to its land-abuse review panel and compensate Nevada acre-for-acre for withdrawn lands.