

*The
Self-Made
Man*

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For him, it began in a moment of shattering stillness. Something separated and fell away. Instinctively his heart understood this 'something' was the long-cherished notion of himself as a distinct individual; an American entity called 'The Self-Made Man.' He'd learned it through generations of irascible ancestors with the same hard-set jawline and gnarly nose. He had pictures of them on his stone mantel. Tintypes going back to the Civil War of his great-great-great-grandfather; a man called Lemuel P. Dodge, who lost an ear fighting for the North, an arm fighting for the South, and was finally hanged for 'womanizing' in Ojinaga and dragged through the dusty streets until his head separated from his torso. There were others: men with long beards and wide-brimmed straw hats, standing three abreast atop giant hay wagons, wooden pitchforks in hand, almost biblical against the prairie sky. Railroad men riding cowcatchers, waving derbies; blasting their way through granite mountains; unstoppable in their absolute conviction of Manifest Destiny. Then, later generations, where the mysterious glint of doubt begins to creep into their eyes. Fighter pilots in leather helmets and silk scarves, gripping the wings of a p-38, but the brave smile to the camera now has a twist in it, like a lamb knowing his time has come.

He'd study these faces in the evenings sometimes, with the fire glow flickering across the stone mantel. He'd pick up the frames for a closer look and pace the room slowly, smoking and tilting the glass to avoid the glare from the fireplace. He'd sit with the portraits on his lap and dust them softly, lovingly, with his blue bandanna. There was a connection there he felt, more real than imagined. More real than his living relatives, who were now scattered to the far ends of the country: places he had no desire to visit, like Tampa or Seattle. Places that might just as well have been on the other side of the moon. Aloneness was a fact of nature, he reasoned. He'd learned to not look beyond it; to avoid the trickery of the mind where women were concerned; to avoid the imagery of seduction altogether. It had never paid off in the past. The mind was not to be trusted in this regard. It had only led him to terrible sorrow. Now, at least, he'd made some small truce with himself.

He stood up and returned the photo to its place on the mantel: the one of his grandfather driving a Model T pickup with a jack mule in tow. He lingered for a while on the image, listening to the owls feed their young in the top of the old tulip poplar out back. It was a nightly ritual he'd grown to look forward to each spring. He'd take his flashlight, step quietly out onto the porch, and cast its beam up the broad split trunk until he caught the nest in a perfect circle of light. There were two babies this year, and as soon as they felt the light on their eyes, they went silent. The mother hovered above them with a small, black snake in her talons. She turned her back to the beam of light and ruffled her wings, then settled. Spring peepers throbbed into the foreground, replacing the shrieking owls, then receded and dropped away into the distant drone of a semi on its way south. He clicked off the light, hoping the owls would start up their racket again; hoping something would come in to occupy the growing stillness. He listened for calves bawling in the distance. Nothing

Sam Shepard, *Cruising Paradise* (1996)