

thought that something got lost when a book became a best-seller. I told him, "Better read than dead!" Ed laughed at that.

Ed told me stories that mitigated against himself, that made him look bad. How he got out of a fight. Things like that. In other words, Ed was an honest man.

Ed and I hiked around for a while through a landscape that Eastlake had immortalized in his New Mexico trilogy.

"I used to help Eastlake chase down his cows," said Ed. "We'd saddle up and ride all over this range. It's not beautiful like Utah, though."

"Maybe not. But it's a hell of a lot more interesting culturally," I said.

"Tell me why you think so."

"Well, there are a lot of Navajos, Puebloans, Apaches, and Hispanos within a fifty-mile radius of right here as the crow flies. At least they're still in touch with the spirit of the land. Utah's too white for me. I don't much like missionaries of any persuasion. When I lived in that old forked-stick hogan at Navajo Mountain, a Mormon missionary would come by once a month and try to convert me to his faith. He regarded Indians as descendants from a dark side of the Bible. I hate missionaries. They try to lure real people away from their own traditions, their own cultural realities. I tried offering him coffee, tobacco, a beer in hopes that he'd take the hint. Finally I had to ask him to leave. Next came a pair of Catholic missionaries. They were easier to deal with. They took me up on the beer. I still have a bone to pick with that villainous Mormon lawyer John Boyden, who ostensibly represented the Hopi Indians as their legal counsel while he worked for the Peabody Coal Company at the same time. The progressive Hopis paid him a million bucks for screwing them. Traditional Hopis like my friends David Menongye and Mina Lansa knew he'd sold them out. Now the Peabody Coal Company's ripping coal out of the heart of their sacred mountain. Black Mesa's sacred to the Navajos, too. It's the body of their female mountain." I was getting worked up.

"Jesus, Loeffler, and you call me a bigot? The Navajos may be in touch with the spirit of the land, but their endlessly copulating sheep and goats have ruined northern Arizona. That reservation of theirs is one of the most overgrazed places I've ever seen. It's a disgrace. And not only that, they're all on welfare. They live in a welfare state just because they're Indians. The Navajo Welfare

Nation. Goddammit! I don't understand why you idealize these people." Ed's life as a welfare caseworker had profoundly affected his egalitarian sensibilities.

"Look, Ed, after your hero Kit Carson, who was working for the federal government, either murdered them or ran them off to Bosque Redondo in the 1860s, where they actually fed them coffee beans and did their best to starve them, demoralize them, and otherwise break them all the way down, they marched them hundreds of miles back, gave them back a few scraggly sheep and goats and threw in a few tools, and told them, Raise sheep from now on. No more raiding or we'll finish you off permanently. So they became full-time shepherders, which they've been now for enough generations that it's their tradition. That's the way they measure their wealth."

"Jack, do you condone what their livestock does to the land?"

"No," I said begrudgingly. "How can anyone condone a disaster like that? But can you condone a government that treats human beings like we've treated the American Indians? A government that all but annihilates them and then tries to reeducate a rich, diverse culture like the Navajos and Apaches to become a part of a leaden, spiritually bereft culture like our own?"

"As you well know, I don't condone any government any more than you do. But I sure as hell don't idealize the noble savage, either. They collect their welfare checks and go get drunk in Gallup. I'm buying those bastards their beer, and I resent it!"

"You buy your beer with your fucking unemployment check and you make value judgments about where they get their beer? Bullshit, Abbey!"

We stood facing each other, glaring at each other in a Mexican standoff. We both started to grin and shoved each other around a little.

"C'mon, Loeffler. I'll buy *you* a beer with *my* unemployment check. Didn't you ever collect unemployment?"

"Yes. And I am filled with shame," I said.

"Now, that is a goddamn lie!! You are the most shameless bastard I ever knew."

"I, a liar? I, shameless? I am wounded too deep to bear."

"There's only one thing that's too deep around here. And not only that, I haven't collected unemployment since *you failed* to go in with *me* on that fire lookout job. Christ, we had it made. Each of us could have been on the lookout for three weeks and then off the fire lookout for three weeks. And we could