

the
country
ahead
of us,
the
country
behind

stories

by

DAVID
GUTERSON

bestselling author of *Snow Falling on Cedars*

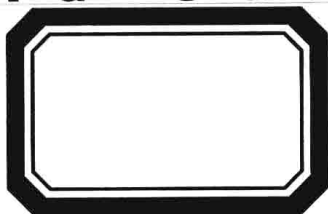
"Stunning emotional honesty."

—CHARLES JOHNSON, author of *Middle Passage*

T h e
C o u n t r y
A h e a d
o f U s,
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D a v i d G u t e r s o n



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acclaim for David Guterson's

The Country Ahead of Us,
the Country Behind

"*The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind* is superb, tough, intense, wise, with characters meticulously rendered. I really cannot imagine a more affecting first collection." —Mary Robison

"David Guterson is my great hope for the future of American fiction. Here at last is an antidote for the pretense and fashionable angst in Brat Pack fiction of the 1980s."

—Charles Johnson, author of *Middle Passage*

"A seamless flow of language and story rewards the reader's efforts. Well crafted and polished . . . these tales tender truth."

—*Seattle Weekly*

"Set mostly in the clean outdoors of the Northwest, in a world in which hunting and fishing and sports are among life's givens, the stories contrast this outward robust confidence with the inner doubts and disillusionments that are, in Guterson's reckoning, what little boys, and big ones, too, are made of. The pieces are well-crafted, the characters taking shape with a few simple brush strokes."

—*Boston Globe*

"A first collection of ten stories—stark, moody portraits of men or boys faced with loss—that are tautly written, austere, occasionally lyrical, and mark Guterson as a writer to watch."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"These are wonderful, compassionate memory pieces told with a fine sense of detail, and without a whiff of sentimentality, whose revelations unfold quietly and inevitably."

—*Booklist*

also by David Guterson

*Family Matters:
Why Homeschooling Makes Sense*

Snow Falling on Cedars

David Guterson
The Country Ahead of Us,
the Country Behind

David Guterson is also the author of *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense* and *Snow Falling on Cedars*, which won the 1995 PEN/Faulkner Award and the Pacific Northwest Bookseller Association Award, among others. A contributing editor to *Harper's* magazine, Mr. Guterson lives on an island in Puget Sound with his wife and children.

T h e
C o u n t r y
A h e a d
o f U s,
t h e
C o u n t r y
B e h i n d

for Robin, Taylor, Travis and Henry

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T h e
C o u n t r y
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Angels in the Snow

We were at my sister's house for Christmas Eve, fire in the fireplace, lights on the tree, Christmas carols playing on the stereo. Outside the window a light snow blew down. Icicles hung from the gutters and in the yard the grass looked sprinkled with powder. By morning everything would be white.

My sister had sent her children to bed and her husband, Larry, was pouring out four glasses of champagne.

"Long life and happiness," he said, "Merry Christmas, everyone."

All this was less than a year ago.

Cora, myself, Larry, my sister: we sat around talking about normal things at first. Jobs, cars, houses, children—I don't remember exactly: pleasant conversation. But then Larry said, because my sister asked, "Christmas on Okinawa? Do you want to know what we did? We got drunk and went to sleep. We passed out. That was Christmas Eve. Christmas

Day we ate ham. We took aspirins. We called home. Somebody at the other end yelled 'Merry Christmas!' at you. When the echo faded you yelled 'Merry Christmas!' back. You hung up and then you were on Okinawa again, it was Thursday and everyone you knew had a hangover."

"Sounds great," my sister said, and kissed his chin. "What about the Japanese hookers?"

Larry sipped at his champagne and smiled. He was a big man in his early thirties, hands thick but not ungraceful, a good growth of hair on his head. My sister had a way of knocking him, of making him out to be stupid, but Larry took it all as a joke, as harmless, as her way of loving him after all.

Larry said, "Hey. Why not? A whore was like giving yourself a Christmas present."

We laughed at that, and in the silence that followed my wife asked me if I had ever slept with a prostitute.

I told them how we had gone to Las Vegas, I told them the whole story that Christmas Eve. My sister remembered—a family vacation, Memorial Day weekend. My father'd had an insurance convention.

"Sweet sixteen and three days in Sin City," Larry suggested, smiling. "But that's not how it was," I said. "That's not it at all." "Well, how was it then?" Cora wanted to know. So I told the three of them the whole thing, a mistake.

We went down there, I said. We got two motel rooms at the end of the Strip, at the edge of town, after the swimming pool there was only the desert, scrub brush and barbed wire fences. It was a quiet place, hot and dusty, air conditioned,

cigarette and pop machines in all the landings. A maid came at ten o'clock and cleaned your room.

My parents went to floor shows, meetings, casinos, maybe department stores, anyway they were never around. They left us hamburger money, telephone numbers. What did they expect? What were they thinking? My sister smeared herself with suntan oil and slept by the swimming pool all day. I swam laps. I was going to be in good shape forever. The other guests lolled around while I swam furiously the backstroke and breaststroke. In the room I did sit-ups in front of the air conditioner. I looked at my muscles in the mirror. I had this *Playboy* magazine at the bottom of my suitcase. In it were photographs of Raquel Welch. Raquel in sequins. Raquel in the shower. Raquel on the beach in Mexico.

"Raquel Welch," I said to them last Christmas Eve. Was that some kind of mistake maybe? Was there something wrong in that? "It must have been *Playboy*," I said to them. "I don't remember clearly."

"He still reads that stuff," said Cora. "Not really," I insisted. "Maybe once in a while." "Oh, come on, John," said Cora. "Where're we going?" I said.

"You guys aren't going *anywhere*," said my sister. "Not at this rate you aren't."

"Not on Christmas, anyway," I said. "Tonight is Christmas Eve."

"That's the spirit," said Larry. "Peace on earth, goodwill toward men and *champagne*."

He filled my glass, grinning, amused. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" played on the stereo.

"Goodwill toward *some* men, anyway," said Cora. "Goodwill is a two-way street."

"Christ," I said. "Shut up."

"Don't tell her to shut up," said my sister. "That just makes everything worse."

"You have to be *sensitive*," Larry threw in, winking. "That's the whole thing nowadays."

"Back to Vegas," I said. "Let me *finish*."

I was swimming laps in the swimming pool, I said. A bright day, ninety-five degrees. Up and down, back and forth, flip turns, chlorinated water sloshing in my goggles. My sister, hair in a bun pinned to the back of her head, lay sprawled out on her back like a greasy Barbie doll. Four or five others sat around in lounge chairs, drinking cans of pop and smoking cigarettes. Air conditioners dripped, a radio played, the maid rolled her cart from room to room.

I sat in the shallows. The maid wasn't half bad. She had a uniform on, like a nurse maybe. Two women lay on their breasts in chaise lounges. One had unclasped the hook to her bathing suit top. The other had a leg turned behind her; her toes made circles in the desert air. A man read a book on the far side of the pool, seated on a towel, his bald head sunburned, his pectorals drooping. By the diving board a fat man in mirrored sunglasses sat in a lounge chair looking wider than he was tall, coiling the silver hairs on his chest between his fingertips, the palm of his hand measuring the weights of his soft formless breasts.

I started swimming again—the kind of teenager who confronts boredom and the dangers of aging with a passionate, religious routine.

Back and forth, up and down, doing the butterfly, flutter

kick and slashing hands, when a room key floated down into the yellow world made possible by the lenses in my swim goggles.

"A sixteen-year-old gigolo," Larry interrupted then. "I could see it coming there, John."

My sister had roasted some Safeway chestnuts, poured melted butter over them, sprinkled them with salt. We ate those now. We drank the champagne and cracked the shells. Larry blew out some of the candles on the Christmas tree—the ones that had burned low into their holders.

Outside, snow covered the last of the lawn. The world looked hushed, delicate and beautiful.

"A room key," said Cora. "Is that right?"

The key in the pool was the fat man's key, I told the others that evening. He waved me over when I came up with it.

I swam to where he was. I looked up and saw my face, nose like a bulb, in his sunglasses. He had his hair cut in a peculiar way—the bangs trimmed short, greasy and distinct, like a Roman soldier in a television movie.

A fat guy in a nylon bikini suit, wristwatch, black leather sandals.

"Listen," he said, leaning down toward the water. "Take that room key and go have a good time. A girl's there, she's waiting for you, big tits, a knockout."

"If this isn't fantasy, what is?" my sister asked.

But Cora said nothing. She was waiting to hear how things came out, waiting for the rest of it with her lips pressed shut.

I told the fat man no, thank you, and left the key on the deck by his sandals.

"Room 201," the fat man said. "If you change your mind, that's where she'll be."

What was the meaning of this? I got out, hooked my thongs on, took my towel and went up to our room. Why? I asked. How much would she cost? Is this how the world of prostitutes worked? Was the fat man a pimp maybe? I felt I had connected somehow with the world of sleaze. My sister came in, took a shower, put her clothes on, her makeup. Younger than me: fifteen.

That evening we ate at a spot called "Sir Steak's," five hundred yards down the road toward town. My mother and father went to see Mitzi Gaynor. My sister read beauty magazines. I sat for a while, then went for a walk. First I went into the desert, drank a Pepsi and looked at the purple shadows of the mountains. Then, vaguely excited, I caught a bus into town.

It was all the things you've heard about. Old ladies waving keno slips. Busloads of gamblers. Drunks stumbling over the sidewalks. Neon wedding palaces. Change spilling out of slot machines.

Sixteen, alone and in Vegas for the first time in my life.

I walked down through Glitter Gulch, the middle of Vegas. I stood outside the Golden Nugget looking in. There was a Rexall Drugs, closed, a neon cowboy on a building top, a golden horseshoe suspended in midair. I sat in the lobby of the MGM Grand, hoping I would see Tom Jones, Frank Sinatra. A million cars, a million people, everyone in a hurry, everyone going to places I couldn't understand.

I wandered. I bought a Pepsi from a machine. I watched some people playing softball in a park. Moths swarmed in