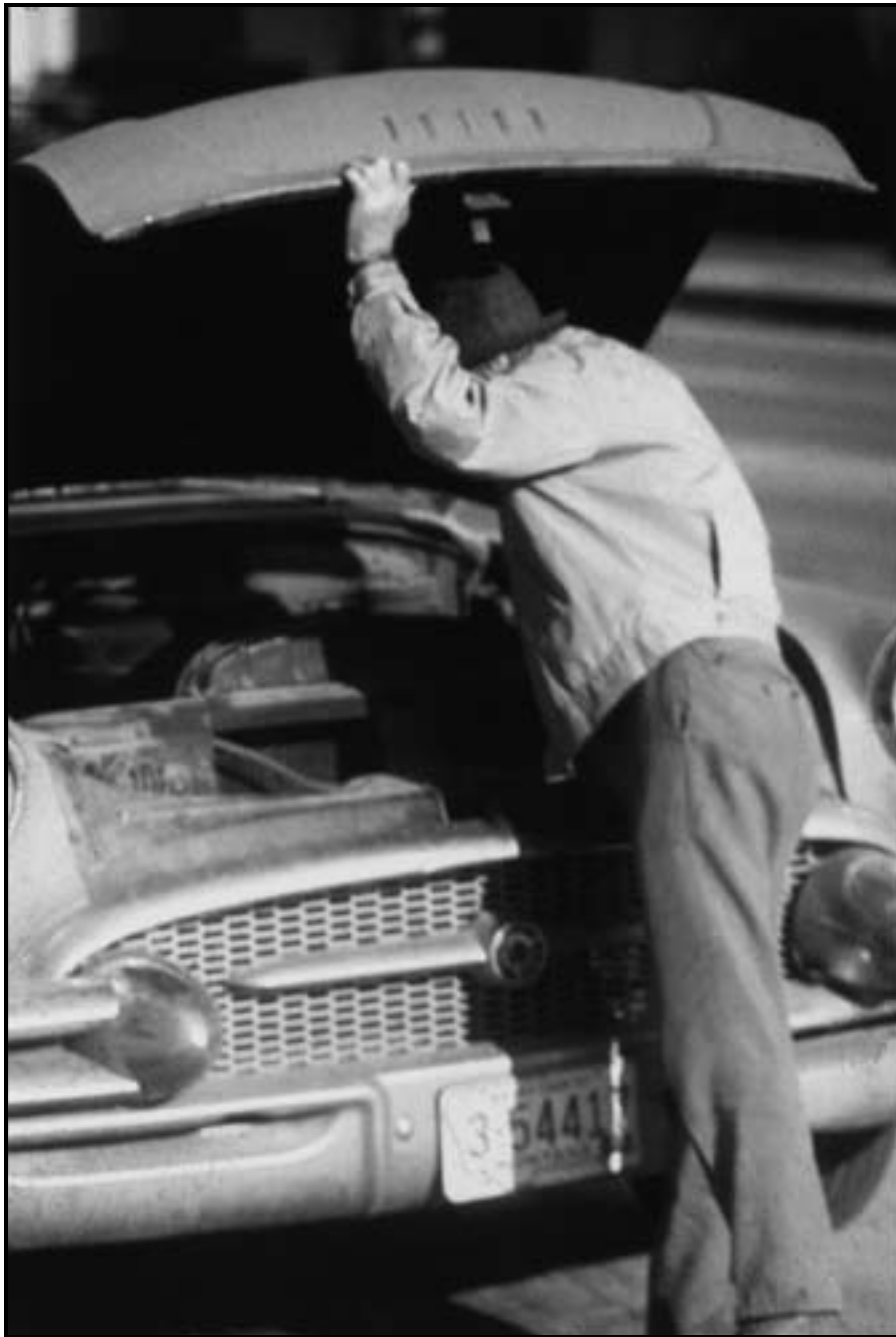


Slides

a short story by GARY BUSLIK

In 1955, when I was nine years old and my sister was ten, my father bought his first 35 mm camera with money he didn't have and dragged us and my mother on a cross-country trip for the opening of Disneyland. He went crazy taking pictures of us standing at the edge of cliffs, holding snakes, showing scrapes and bruises, and pretending to be happy. At the time I wanted to smash that old Kodak to smithereens. But now, of course, I am very grateful for that camera.



DOUG McMAINS

▶ *Clack-click.* Here is a picture of our Chevy station wagon, navy blue body with a white roof, its rhombus shadow sprawled over a gas station in Iowa. We left our apartment in the middle of the night because the car and its roof rack were piled with belongings, like the Joads' jalopy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and my father did not want the landlord to know we had no intention of coming back.

In the slide, the car glints in the early-morning light, clean from the terrifying thunderstorm we drove through all night. Once, lightning even struck the car, and this slide's crisp detail shows the burn mark in the door where the bolt struck.

In the background is a billboard for Chesterfield cigarettes, with a picture of a man and woman breezing along in a convertible, laughing and smoking, hair wind-swept, very happy. No children. But in our Chevy, my sister and I are slouched in the back, wedged between mounds of suitcases, bedding, and camera equipment, looking glum. Maybe we were just waking up. My mother is standing next to the car door, pointing to the place the lightning struck and smiling with staged relief. She sure as hell didn't smile during the storm. She is wearing powder blue pedal pushers and a pink-and-white wing-collar blouse with a palm-tree print, the fronds of which you can make out in the slide's stunning resolution. (No modern digital camera can come close.) On her feet are pink canvas shoes with straps that wrap around her ankles. A scarf covers her head and is knotted severely under her chin. You can see every hair curl trying to escape.

As my father aims the Kodak, his shadow claws across the asphalt, up a gas pump, jaggedly slicing a crimson pop machine. After he took this shot, my mother bought a grape

Nehi, took a swig herself, then handed it to my sister and me. The bottle is not in this picture, but such is the power of slides to remind you. The colors are so vibrant that the images are almost three-dimensional — living, breathing things.

Even after all these years, that old pop machine makes me ache for a Nehi, which didn't taste anything remotely like a grape but was so sweet it almost made me forget the terror of the storm. The machine was a horizontal tub with a heavy-hinged lid and ice on the bottom. You had to pull your preferred bottle by its cap along a metal hanger to a kind of holding pen that, when you put in your nickel, released a trap door and allowed you to lift the bottle. It reminds me of the old Union Stockyards, where they prodded cattle through a labyrinth of pens and gates to slaughter. There was no place to escape, only the illusion of free will.

My father's prodding device was his new camera, a Kodak SLR, which he bought instead of paying our last month's rent. We were going to be living out of suitcases for the next few weeks anyhow, he reasoned. We'd just find a new place to live when we got back. That's why my sister and I got smushed in with so much crap in the back of the station wagon — crap that included slide film, lenses, a tripod, a light meter, a flash bracket and bulb, and still more film.

▶ *Clack-click.* Here is a picture of a tree growing out of a boulder near Ames, Iowa. In front of the rock is a post with a plaque, and the slide is so clear you can read every word on it. After noticing a sapling sprouting from this rock, nineteenth-century firemen threw water on it from their fire engine. Eventually the sprout grew into a tree, and here it is — stout, full-leaved, tyrannical — lording over its legions of corn, columns of deep green foot soldiers, tall and impenetrable. I am on top of the boulder, looking miserable, refusing to smile, taunting my father with silent defiance. I remember trying to touch the tree and my father screaming bloody murder, as if I should have already known you weren't supposed to touch a stupid tree. What was so terrible? All I wanted to do was touch it.

It seems to me now, after seeing this picture so many times over the years, that the tourism board of Ames, Iowa, was trying to create a kind of parable: with proper nurturing and encouragement, even a frail sapling can overcome the brute power of solid stone to reach heaven.

Off to the side, you can just make out my sister standing in the corn, deep in the stalks' shadows, a pinpoint of red barrette her only hint of color. Having a year's more experience with my father, she knew what would happen as soon as he told me to climb onto that rock, so she hid in the corn.

My mother is not in this picture. I don't remember where she was when he took it, but it's possible he was letting her turn the car around. She had a driver's license, but I don't recall her driving on that trip to California. He didn't trust her, I guess. When they were in the car together, there was no question who would drive, even if he was dead tired and she was alert.

MY FATHER was a child of the Depression. He was only nineteen when my sister was born. He tried many jobs, but none seemed right. Meanwhile, we kept moving from one apartment to another, one relative's house to another, one neighborhood to another. Maybe he believed that, like John Steinbeck's Depression-era wanderers, he would find himself by hitting

the road. Or maybe he just wanted to escape — his problem being that he couldn't escape us.

▶ *Clack-click.* Here is a picture of me shirtless, sleepy-eyed, with a dirty face. I never did like to wash. When I cried, my mother would wet a tissue with my tears and wipe the dirt off my cheeks. I was a skinny kid. In this slide, my tan pants — rolled-up, baggy hand-me-downs from my cousin Sherwin — are cinched around my waist, a frayed belt dangling to my knees. The slide is so sharp, you can see my broken belt loop and the grass stains on my knees. Even after all these years the clouds still seem to have texture, their shadows dark on the landscape. The shadows of my father's arms and his Kodak pierce my chest.

I am standing on the edge of a drop-off with a valley of shrubby hillocks and dry, jaundiced earth below me. I think this is Wyoming. The sky is inky blue with fluffy clouds tinged in copper. If I had lost my balance, or the edge had given way and I had fallen backward, I probably would have survived. The drop was not straight down, and I see no jagged rocks. Maybe my father didn't really want to kill me. I remember him saying, "Back, back. Go on, you little chicken. Don't you trust your own daddy? Don't keep looking back. I'll tell you when to stop." When he finally did tell me to stop, the ground had started to slope. My toes clawed dirt, but my heels grasped air. I remember searching for my mother and seeing her looking at me from the car, catching my glance, and looking away. He told me to smile. "Years from now I want you to remember what a good time you're having. Go on, big grin." I remember not being able to breathe until I heard the click of the Kodak.

MY FATHER never tired of regaling us with the life and times of Kodak's founder, George Eastman, a man he admired immensely. Although Eastman was born seventy-five years before my father, Dad believed they had a lot in common. George's father died when George was twelve, exactly like Dad's, and the elder Eastman had also left his young family destitute. Like my father, George Eastman was a high-school dropout. At fourteen, they both had to find jobs. There the similarities seem to end. Eastman managed to overcome his economic adversity. His gift for organization and management, his tireless work ethic, and his lively and inventive mind made him a successful entrepreneur by his midtwenties, enabling him to lead his Eastman Kodak Company to the forefront of American industry. My father claimed he possessed the same temperament and mental skills. The only difference, he often told us, was that George was not saddled with a wife and two kids. If only he did not have to feed us, he would be free to "think big and act on it, too."

(end of excerpt)