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Excerpts:

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The following is the Epilogue of the 1991 book Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place, written by Terry Tempest Williams, now available in paperback. This book is a powerful personal account of a Mormon woman's family's life experience with the consequences of radioactive fallout from the Nevada test site. The test site was illegally created on the Shoshoni ancestral lands stolen by the U.S. government in violation of the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley which it signed with the Shoshoni guaranteeing the sovereignty of the Shoshoni people over their traditional homeland, Newe Segobia.

-- ratitor
I belong to a Clan of One-Breasted Women. My mother, my grandmothers, and six aunts have all had mastectomies. Seven are dead. The two who survive have just completed rounds of chemotherapy and radiation.

I've had my own problems: two biopsies for breast cancer and a small tumor removed between my ribs diagnosed as "a borderline malignancy."

This is my family history.

Most statistics tell us breast cancer is genetic, hereditary, with rising percentages attached to fatty diets, childlessness, or becoming pregnant after 30. What they don't say is living in Utah may be the greatest hazard of all.

We are a Mormon family with roots in Utah since 1847. The Word of Wisdom, a religious doctrine of health, kept the women in my family aligned with good foods: no coffee, tea, tobacco, or alcohol. For the most part, these women were finished having babies by the time they were 30. And only one faced breast cancer prior to 1960. Traditionally, as a group of people, Mormons have a low rate of cancer.

Is our family a cultural anomaly? The truth is, we didn't think about it. Those who did, usually the men, simply said, "bad genes." The women's attitude was stoic. Cancer was a part of life. On February 16, 1971, the eve before my mother's surgery, I accidentally picked up the telephone and overheard her ask my grandmother what she could expect.

"Diane, it is one of the most spiritual experiences you will ever encounter."

I quietly put down the receiver.

Two days later, my father took my three brothers and me to the hospital to visit her. She met us in the lobby in a wheelchair. No bandages were visible. I'll never forget her radiance, the way she held herself in a purple velour robe and how she gathered us around her.

"Children, I am fine. I want you to know I felt the arms of God around me."

We believed her. My father cried. Our mother, his wife, was 38 years old.

Two years ago, after my mother's death from cancer, my father and I were having dinner together. He had just returned from St. George, where his construction
company was putting in natural gas lines for towns in southern Utah. He spoke of his love for the country: the sandstone landscape, bare-boned and beautiful. He had just finished hiking the Kolob trail in Zion National Park. We got caught up in reminiscing, recalling with fondness our walk up Angels Landing on his fiftieth birthday and the years our family had vacationed there. This was a remembered landscape where we had been raised.

Over dessert, I shared a recurring dream of mine. I told my father that for years, as long as I could remember, I saw this flash of light in the night in the desert. That this image had so permeated my being, I could not venture south without seeing it again, on the horizon, illuminating buttes and mesas.

"You did see it," he said.

"Saw what?" I asked, a bit tentative.

"The bomb. The cloud. We were driving home from Riverside, California. You were sitting on your mother's lap. She was pregnant. In fact, I remember the date, September 7, 1957. We had just gotten out of the Service. We were driving north, past Las Vegas. It was an hour or so before dawn, when this explosion went off. We not only heard it, but felt it. I thought the oil tanker in front of us had blown up. We pulled over and suddenly, rising from the desert floor, we saw it clearly, this golden-stemmed cloud, the mushroom. The sky seemed to vibrate with an eerie pink glow. Within a few minutes, a light ash was raining on the car."

I stared at my father. This was new information to me.

"I thought you knew that," my father said. "It was a common occurrence in the fifties."

It was at that moment I realized the deceit I had been living under. Children growing up in the American Southwest, drinking contaminated milk from contaminated cows, even from the contaminated breasts of their mothers, my mother--members, years later, of the Clan of One-Breasted Women.

It is a well-known story in the Desert West, "The Day We Bombed Utah," or perhaps, "The Years We Bombed Utah." Aboveground atomic testing in Nevada took place from January 27, 1951, through July 11, 1962. The winds were blowing north, covering "low use segments of the population" in Utah with fallout and leaving sheep dead in their tracks, and the climate was right. The United States of the 1950s was red, white, and blue. The Korean War was raging. McCarthyism was rampant. Ike was it and the Cold War was hot. If you were against nuclear testing, you were for a Communist regime.

Much has been written about this "American nuclear tragedy." Public health was secondary to national security. The Atomic Energy Commissioner, Thomas Murray, was quoted as saying, "Gentlemen, we must not let anything interfere with this series of tests, nothing."

Again and again, the public was told by its government, in spite of burns, blisters, and nausea, "It has been found that the tests may be conducted with adequate
assurance of safety under conditions prevailing at the bombing reservation."
Assuaging public fears was simply a matter of public relations. A news release
typical of the times stated, "We find no basis for concluding that harm to any
individual has resulted from radioactive fallout."

On August 30, 1979, during Jimmy Carter's presidency, a suit was filed entitled
"Irene Allen v. The United States of America." Allen was the first to be
alphabetically listed with 24 test cases, representative of nearly 1,200 plaintiffs
seeking compensation from the United States government for cancers caused from
nuclear testing in Nevada.

Irene Allen lived in Hurricane, Utah. She was the mother of five children and had
been widowed twice. Her first husband, with their two oldest boys, had watched the
tests from the roof of the local high school. He died of leukemia in 1956. Her second
husband died of pancreatic cancer in 1978.

In a town meeting conducted by Utah Senator Orrin Hatch, shortly before the suit
was filed, Allen said, "I am not exactly blaming the government, I want you to know,
Senator Hatch. But I thought if my testimony could help in any way so this wouldn't
happen again to any of the generations coming up after us . . . I am really happy to be
here this day to bear testimony to this."

God-fearing people. This is just one story in an anthology of thousands.

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of nuclear testing. What matters is that our government is immune: "The King can do
no wrong."

In Mormon culture, authority is respected, obedience is revered, and independent
thinking is not. I was taught as a young girl not to "make waves" or "rock the boat."

"Just let it go--" my mother would say. "You know how you feel, that's what counts."

For many years, I did just that--listened, observed, and quietly formed my own
opinions within a culture that rarely asked questions because it had all the answers.
But one by one, I watched the women in my family die common, heroic deaths. We
sat in waiting rooms hoping for good news, always receiving the bad. I cared for
them, bathed their scarred bodies, and kept their secrets. I watched beautiful women
become bald as cisplatin, Cytoxan, and Adriamycin were injected into their veins. I held their foreheads as they vomited green-black bile and I shot them with morphine when the pain became inhuman. In the end, I witnessed their last peaceful breaths, becoming a midwife to the rebirth of their souls. But the price of obedience became too high.

The fear and inability to question authority that ultimately killed rural communities in Utah during atmospheric testing of atomic weapons was the same fear I saw being held in my mother's body. Sheep. Dead sheep. The evidence is buried.

I cannot prove that my mother, Diane Dixon Tempest, or my grandmothers, Lettie Romney Dixon and Kathryn Blackett Tempest, along with my aunts, contracted cancer from nuclear fallout in Utah. But I can't prove they didn't.

My father's memory was correct: the September blast we drove through in 1957 was part of Operation Blummbob, one of the most intensive series of bombs to be initiated. The flash of light in the night in the desert I had always thought was a dream developed into a family nightmare. It took 14 years, from 1957 to 1971, for cancer to show up in my mother--the same amount of time, Howard L. Andrews, an authority on radioactive fallout at the National Institutes of Health, says radiation cancer requires to become evident. The more I learn about what it means to be a "downwinder," the more questions I drown in.

What I do know, however, is that as a Mormon woman of the fifth generation of "Latter-Day Saints," I must question everything, even if it means losing my faith, becoming a member of a border tribe among my own people. Tolerating blind obedience in the name of patriotism or religion ultimately takes our lives.

When the Atomic Energy Commission described the country north of the Nevada Test Site as virtually uninhabited desert terrain, my family members were some of the "virtual uninhabitants."

One night, I dreamed women from all over the world were circling a blazing fire in the desert. They spoke of change, of how they hold the moon in their bellies and wax and wane with its phases. They mocked at the presumption of even-tempered beings and made promises that they would never fear the witch inside themselves. The women danced wildly as sparks broke away from the flames and entered the night sky as stars.

And they sang a song given to them by Shoshoni grandmothers:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ah ne nah, nah} & \quad \text{Consider the rabbits} \\
\text{nin nah nah--} & \quad \text{How gently they walk on the earth--} \\
\text{Ah ne nah, nah} & \quad \text{Consider the rabbits} \\
\text{nin nah nah--} & \quad \text{How gently they walk on the earth--} \\
\text{Nyaga mutzi} & \quad \text{We remember them} \\
\text{oh ne nay--} & \quad \text{We can walk gently also--} \\
\text{Nyaga mutzi} & \quad \text{We remember them} \\
\text{oh ne nay--} & \quad \text{We can walk gently also--}
\end{align*}
\]

The women danced and drummed and sang for weeks, preparing themselves for what...
was to come. They would reclaim the desert for the sake of their children, for the sake of the land.

A few miles downwind from the fire circle, bombs were being tested. Rabbits felt the tremors. Their soft leather pads on paws and feet recognized the shaking sands while the roots of mesquite and sage were smoldering. Rocks were hot from the inside out and dust devils hummed unnaturally. And each time there was another nuclear test, ravens watched the desert heave. Stretch marks appeared. The land was losing its muscle.

The women couldn’t bear it any longer. They were mothers. They had suffered labor pains but always under the promise of birth. The red-hot pains beneath the desert promised death only, as each bomb became stillborn. A contract was being drawn by the women who understood the fate of the earth as their own.

Under the cover of darkness, ten women slipped under the barbed- wire fence and entered the contaminated country. They were trespassing. They walked toward the town of Mercury in moonlight, taking their cues from coyote, kit fox, antelope ground squirrel, and quail. They moved quietly and deliberately through the maze of Joshua trees. When a hint of daylight appeared they rested, drinking tea and sharing their rations of food. The women closed their eyes. The time had come to protest with the heart, that to deny one's genealogy with the earth was to commit treason against one's soul.

At dawn, the women draped themselves in Mylar, wrapping long streamers of silver plastic around their arms to blow in the breeze. They wore clear masks that became the faces of humanity. And when they arrived on the edge of Mercury, they carried all the butterflies of a summer day in their wombs. They paused to allow their courage to settle.

The town, which forbids pregnant women and children to enter because of radiation risks to their health, was asleep. The women moved through the streets as winged messengers, twirling around each other in slow motion, peeping inside homes and watching the easy sleep of men and women. They were astonished by such stillness and periodically would utter a shrill note or low cry just to verify life.

The residents finally awoke to what appeared as strange apparitions. Some simply stared. Others called authorities, and in time, the women were apprehended by wary soldiers dressed in desert fatigues. They were taken to a white building on the other edge of Mercury. When asked who they were and why they were there, the women replied, "We are mothers and we have come to reclaim the desert for our children."

The soldiers arrested them. As the ten women were blindfolded and handcuffed, they began singing:

You can't forbid us everything
You can't forbid us to think--
You can't forbid our tears to flow
And you can't stop the songs that we sing.

The women continued to sing louder and louder, until they heard the voices of their sisters moving across the mesa.
"Call for reinforcements," one soldier said.

"We have," interrupted one woman. "We have--and you have no idea of our numbers."

On March 18, 1988, I crossed the line at the Nevada Test Site and was arrested with nine other Utahns for trespassing on military lands. They are still conducting nuclear tests in the desert. Ours was an act of civil disobedience. But as I walked toward the town of Mercury, it was more than a gesture of peace. It was a gesture on behalf of the Clan of One-Breasted Women.

As one officer cinched the handcuffs around my wrists, another frisked my body. She found a pen and a pad of paper tucked inside my left boot.

"And these?" she asked sternly.

"Weapons," I replied.

Our eyes met. I smiled. She pulled the leg of my trousers back over my boot.

"Step forward, please," she said as she took my arm.

We were booked under an afternoon sun and bused to Tonopah, Nevada. It was a two-hour ride. This was familiar country to me. The Joshua trees standing their ground had been named by my ancestors who believed they looked like prophets pointing west to the promised land. These were the same trees that bloomed each spring, flowers appearing like white flames in the Mojave. And I recalled a full moon in May when my mother and I had walked among them, flushing out mourning doves and owls.

The bus stopped short of town. We were released. The officials thought it was a cruel joke to leave us stranded in the desert with no way to get home. What they didn't realize is that we were home, soul-centered and strong, women who recognized the sweet smell of sage as fuel for our spirits.

Terry Tempest Williams is naturalist-in-residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History in Salt Lake City. Her latest book, _Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place_, was published by Pantheon Books in October, 1991, and is available in paperback.

True, the white man brought great change. But the varied fruits of his civilization,
though highly colored and inviting, are sickening and deadening. And if it be the part of civilization to maim, rob, and thwart, then what is progress?

I am going to venture that the man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures, and acknowledging unity with the universe of things, was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization....

-- Chief Luther Standing Bear, 1933, From the Land of the Spotted Eagle, p.515