

*A raw new voice in American fiction*

~ *Rolling Stone*

# Utah Died for Your Sins



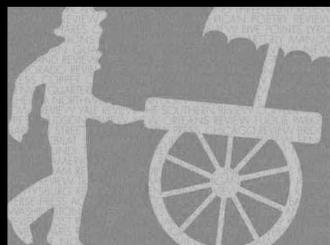
a story by

Max Zimmer

author of the trilogy

If Where You're  
Going Isn't Home

Pushcart  
Prize Winner



Copyright © 1978 Max Zimmer  
All Rights Reserved

Originally published in *Quarry West*  
Winner of the *Pushcart Prize*  
Nominated by Raymond Carver

*A raw new voice in American fiction*  
from the review in  
*Rolling Stone Magazine*

Author of the Trilogy

*If Where You're Going Isn't Home*

The ten-year journey of Shake Tauffler,  
a boy with a dream to play jazz trumpet,  
growing up Mormon in America

Book 1 available in paperback and ebook

[www.maxzimmer.com](http://www.maxzimmer.com)

# Utah Died for Your Sins

You might have heard, somewhere in October, this way to hunt deer: take a double-edged razor blade, embed one edge in a salt block and leave the other edge in the air, and place the block on a deer trail. A deer comes out of the hills on its way to water after sunset and begins to lick the block. The first lick slices its tongue. As it runs its tongue repeatedly across the block, as the blade rises higher into the flesh, the deer begins to get the better taste of licking its own blood with the salt. The animal will stand over the block and lick at the blade until it bleeds itself to death.

This method, you are told, has some advantage over killing a deer with a rifle. First of all, the traditional hunt includes a chase. When a deer is shot at the end of such a chase, its muscles are pumped full of blood. This gives the meat too rough, almost too alive a taste. The blood, cooked in the meat, creates indigestion in some people. There is an unpalatable sense of

thickness about it. On the other hand, when a deer licks at a razor blade in a block of salt, licks the salt away from around the blade, the animal is calm. There is a minimal flow of blood through its muscles. It has probably just eaten; its blood is concentrated in the inedible organs around its stomach. And it will die only after the heart has pumped the muscles and the organs out, only after the meat has been bled thoroughly by the tongue. Venison is a wild meat. Blood carries the taste of bark and harsh grass. The absence of blood in the meat minimizes this wild aspect of its flavor.

Second, as the trend is away from hunters developing their sense of aim at a target range, you would also have heard that a gunshot from a modern rifle is designed to kill or adequately maim a deer with little regard to where it enters the animal. Whoever you heard this from has the story of having seen three legs amputated from a deer in a forest with a solitary shot. In its method of mushrooming into a round plow, a complaint against this kind of gunshot is that it unavoidably ruins much of the edible flesh. A razor blade in a block of salt costs only the tongue. It does not shred or hack at anything else. Some people prefer to eat tongue; there is no argument with them; let them carry their rifles after a deer, and aim, when they have clear sighting, away from the head.

And at last, there is a humane and pastoral element to a deer that is dead as if it had slept there, after filling its belly with blood that will not be digested. Such a deer is easier to butcher than a deer that has been, say, gutshot. A gutshot deer

has lost the integrity of its organs; it has lost the ability to have its organs told apart. There is nothing to be learned about how the human body functions in the butchering of a gutshot deer.

So there are razor blades that never shave an armpit or a leg or a face. There are razor blades that never graze the skin. Razor blades that stand in wait instead for animals that graze on high and slanted meadows. There are razor blades that never slice an apple on Halloween, although you read about those apples in October, at breakfast, already shaved for the day.

Consider this. If you had an automobile in 1959, and held your cigarette in the palm of your hand at night at a hamburger drive-in and looked out at the street, you would not be bored with your automobile. Nor, here in October, on the outskirts of a Utah town, would you have heard of alloy wheels. You would have a friend with a 1940 Ford; he would have it thoroughly cherried out. Your 1951 Olds would look to you as though a hundred relatives had aged it whenever the Ford is around. You would choose, as a consequence, to customize your Olds. This is how you do it.

Appletons are shells that resemble spotlights. They attach to the posts of the windshield, and have the shape of small, brilliant warheads on your fenders. You purchase a pair from Western Auto. From quarter-inch boilerplate, you make a set of shackles to bolt into the A-frames behind your wheels, and lower the front of your Olds by four inches. Your work runs you into November. To avoid having your hands become clumsy

## Utah Died for Your Sins

with the cold air, you work now in your father's garage. You dismantle the exhaust system, and rebuild it with glasspack mufflers and scavenger pipes, two or four flared tubes that hang out under your axle. You remove all the trim from the body, remove the hood ornament, remove the trunk ornament, and push putty into the resulting holes. You flush the putty with the contour of the body using a sanding block; you paint your Olds with either metalflake or fishscale mixed into a color from the spectrum of Fuller automotive paints. Or you paint it candy apple red. You hang a tie or your high school tassel on the rearview mirror. You fix a hula dancer that has a pair of eyehooks for a pelvis, or a dog whose imitation ruby eyes are wired to your brakelights, on the deck in the rear window.

There is an old round refrigerator in your father's garage. Random cans of Olympia and Coors rattle on the shelves when you smack the door shut, and you have a habit, now, of looking out the window at the asphalt as you drink half the can. If you took an Olympia, you scratch the paper label in half, and look at the dots on the back. There are from one two four of them, in a short brown row. One dot is to find her. Two are to find her and feel her. Three are to do these, and fuck her, and with four dots, you forget her. You replace your rockerarm covers and air cleaner with chrome accessories, and tap a wolf whistle you ordered from J.C. Whitney into the intake manifold, and force the wire that controls the whistle through the firewall and into the passenger compartment. You weld a row of razor blades inside the lip of the hood. Your customary luck with

dots is two.

And last you have the spinner hubcaps. They are round pressed plates as all hubcaps are; they have two raised bars that cross one another and span the plate in four thick spokes that knife out from the center of the hubcap in four directions. You press the spinners into the wheelrims because alloy wheels have not occurred yet at the accessory shops. Also, your Olds is used; you bought it when it was seven years old, with the spots worn where you would not have worn them, with crumbs and french fries that are rough on your fingertips when you push your hands into the fat cloth crack between the bench and the backrest. And you look across the black metal dashboard and find it laced with the transparent coronas of drinks that perhaps are seven years old as well; some of the stains are indelible, rings of microscopic blisters under the surface of the paint, and the windshield there ahead of you has been starred in four places by rocks. The splines of the stars are the edges of split glass, and they catch the sunset and make fiery spears of it when you yaw the Olds back and forth along a canyon road. The front left wheel sets a steady tremor at 65 miles an hour that the Olds amplifies with rattles you think it has always had.

So you resent that your Olds has a history without you. You hear that it belonged to a basketball coach at a local high school, and you come to avoid that neighborhood. You have modified it to avoid these discomforts of its past, rather than joined your history with it, and this is no ordinary luck.

Rather, this is November. You sit with your date in your

automobile much as you would sit with her in a restaurant: together, on one half of the booth, you both look at the half where you chose not to sit, you both look at the windshield. On your table, you look at the same coronas of those unknown drinks as on your dashboard. You, this is more obscure to you now; she is who she is because you have chosen her to sit in your customized Olds, spinners and all. She is not opposite you, nor have you thought of her as opposite you, never had her at a kitchen table. She knows the Olds is yours for what she wants. She shaves her legs with her father's safety razor, she tells you, as high as her knees. You hear this, you look at your car keys, you look at your radio, you look at her; the Olds is no longer yours. She lets your blood, not hers, when you feel the hot Kotex in her crotch. At dawn, if you have a rooster in your rear window, its crow will have the sound of a woman with a knife in her throat, sobbing.

But with the advent of alloy wheels, the spinner is a style of hubcap that has been defunct, now, for longer than you can recollect, except in remote areas of Utah, where alloy wheels are still unheard of. There the accessory shops still carry spinners. There, you can look at a 1940 Ford with its spinners twisting the lights at midnight into cellophane-spangled toothpicks, and have three probabilities occur to you. The first, that the rear axle is locked, so that the rear wheels never deviate from one another in their rate of revolution, so that rubber is sloughed off whenever the Ford rounds a curve. The second, that its spinners will rotate on who knows whose automobile in

another month, perhaps yours. And the third, that your next hamburger will be stabbed with that kind of toothpick, when you raise it on that kind of night to your teeth in a crowd of high school kids.

The second probability occurs to you because spinners are as easy as silverware to steal. You wrap your hands around the spokes, and you transact four sharp yanks with Midnight Auto. To stall you, your friend has installed hubcap locks that use the valve stem as their anchor. These are heavy and complicated knobs that would require you to rebalance your wheels, as he has; you would have to steal his wheel weights as well. Or he has etched his name into a hidden place on the back, and let it be spread that his spinners are marked and registered. Or he has taken the law into his own hands. The spokes of his spinners are hollow. He has pushed putty into the spokes from the rear. He has cut a number of double-edged razor blades half-way down into the putty. He has left you with your fingers pointing off your hands in eight directions at once. Each finger is a castanet. Each direction is an escape route.

As a result, your fingers only rattle now when your hands try to imitate how they once could cup a cigarette against your palm. You only have the act as a memory. To keep what you remember about yourself alive, you walk while you are hunting onto a dirt road in an autumn blizzard and try to hold handfuls of mud.

To hunt, to steal, to masturbate are to yearn to be self-held, to be hermaphroditic. They have been rewarded, in older cul-

tures, by amputating the hands at the wrists. Look who you are, without your hands. You hide in the Olds. You run the Olds out to show how your spinners pluck at the neon curlicues up and down the street. You ask where hamburgers are sold in sacks. Look what you could do.

And once you are without hands, a friend delivers a candle she has molded, out of paraffin and aluminum foil, into the shape of a hexagonal nut. You catch yourself at the thought of wrenches. You resent mementos and medals and poorly chosen presents. You make the effort to type a letter to her; you read the letter aloud, and your mouth aches.

It has been my experience, you read, with the candle you gave me, that aluminum foil does not burn. Therefore, your candle has become an ashtray. Imagine how long it will take a candle to burn away because of the cigarettes I happen to stub out in the wax and the foil around its wick. Keep your father's razor sharp, and don't come around here hairy at the knees.

But here you are let off the hook; here you hit four dots. The name at the end of the letter is not yours. It is Seymour Utah. Suppose he has hands. He, then, is the friend with the 1940 Ford. Now, more than thirty years old, he has a motorcycle also, a 360 Bultaco, manufactured for riding in the hills, a dirt bike ready to ride from the factory. He has added the equipment to enable himself to ride it on the street as well.

One afternoon he rides it to the Ratskeller for an eight-inch venison pizza. The Ratskeller has venison pizza available during the deerhunt in October. Utah likes to leave his helmet with

his bike and has already had two helmets stolen. More interested, still, in punishment than in prevention, he has formed a piece of steel into a band that fits behind the padded headband in his helmet, and has welded seventeen razor blades around the interior of the band. He inserts the band into his helmet whenever he parks the bike. If a thief has no knowledge of it, the band would treat his head the way a Vegemetic would. Utah keeps the headband in the compartment beneath his seat when he rides the Bultaco. He looks over the counter, where the cook runs a razorsharp handheld wheel across the pizza four times without having it fall apart. Against a wall, at a table the size of his lap, Utah eats the pizza with his hands, clear-headed enough for anybody, clearheaded enough to recall the last time he took a deer out of the hills himself.

It was two years ago. It was four miles off the highway, off a dirt spur that led to Cedar Fork, along a deer trail. The deer had been in motion, in the air, and its legs had folded around its stomach as it fell. It had been gutshot. It began to blizzard as Utah ran the slurry of the deer's guts out onto the sparse snow. He set it on its hooves and held it with his knees. This let him reach around to its chest from the back and spread its ribcage open. Staggering, the animal in his arms, he lifted it and fit it over the Bultaco backward, because he didn't want another hunter to think he was riding a live deer; he didn't want another hunter thinking he could shoot it out from under him. When he had it seated right, its ribcage held the gas tank, its rear legs dangled out over the handlebars, and its head would

swing in the mud of the knobbed rear tire. Like a child on a mechanized animal, he rode the deer and the bike the four miles of the slippery trail back to the highway. He was covered with mud. Mud covered him and the deer in a communal hide. Mud sloughed out of its ribcage when he pulled the deer off the Bultaco.

He had long ago unlocked the rear axle of the Ford. Parked on the shoulder where the mud road rose to the highway, it was no more now than an old automobile, with a rack he had bought to hang the Bultaco off the rear bumper. He pulled the mud out of the deer. He pushed the mud off his arms. He looked up the highway to where the mud ran into the sky. He folded the animal into the trunk and drove it the thirty miles to Kearns, where he lived. The wipers did not work in the blizzard.

A razor blade is honed to enough of an edge that the first recognition of having been cut is not a result of pain. After he left the Ratskeller, Utah was first aware of what he had forgotten to do, and had done, when he thought that it was too red and too early in the afternoon for a sunset. He was amazed at the beauty, first of all, of what he had thought was a sunset. The beat of the Bultaco on the highway became hard to distinguish from the taste of the pizza. Both perceptions ran down his throat. He headed his dirt bike west on the Bingham highway. The helmet covered his face completely, except for those regions of his face where he had to shave. The wind dried the blood there, as it ran down the slant of his cheeks one layer af-

ter another, like thin red frosting on his whiskers. He pushed the helmet off his head while he rode. He began to look for a half-familiar dirt road toward Cedar Fork. His hand reached out to turn the bright ring of the rearview mirror up until he could look at his face. The mirror shook from the resonance of the engine. In the mirror his head shook. For a moment, while his hand worked at the final adjustment of the mirror, and before he turned it rapidly down again, his hand held this pocket-sized, shaking portrait of himself: a huge rotting tomato in the wind, or a heart that stood and oozed blood onto his shoulders. He was most astonished at how calm his hands were on the handlegrips, at how logical it was to have a tachometer, a gray gasoline tank, and the gray rumbling smudge of the highway all between his knees. It all worked. It all came together. He was an extrapolation of all this logic. And there was the road toward Cedar Fork. He turned off the highway and onto the dirt road. He could feel himself sweat more than he could feel himself bleed. As the Bultaco dropped off the highway, as he shifted it down, his left hand pulled and released the clutch lever and his right hand twisted the accelerator grip as calmly as paper gloves that have just been tossed onto a fire, that always look, for a moment, before they tremble and crack apart at their kindling temperature, as though they are there to calm the flames. His left shoe worked the notches of the gearshift pedal.

The road hurried him up toward the cedar. He scratched the blood from his eyes. The mirror struck him now as a circu-

lar, bouncing postcard of the country he had come across, the country he was leaving orange with October dust. He ignored the notion of sending the postcard anywhere. It would not hold still enough to sign, he thought; besides, he liked postcards of wildlife; at a Union 76 truckstop, he had bought eleven postcards of a jackelope once, depicted in a butchered taxidermist's trick as a jackrabbit with the antlers of a Wyoming antelope, and had mailed four of them. One had come to your address. Hoping to put an animal on the mirror, he turned the Bultaco onto a deer trail. He followed his hands. All he knew about was how thirsty he was, after the pizza, and how a deer trail, if it did not lead to water, would go on into the hills like any trail until it did lead to water. And so he continued to chase this old deerhunter's lie. How many miles is uncertain when he laid his head in the trail, and the Bultaco, held at full throttle, scrambled out from under him like

Like. This is complicated. Like a half-eaten grasshopper. Like a spider bereft of its legs on one side. Like a jackrabbit speared to the earth. Or like a rattlesnake, broken almost in half by a stone, its two halves thrashing, as though this would make sense to it of its wound.

Then here is this. Does a rattlesnake coil or uncoil from such a wound. Does it rattle. Do its two halves coil and uncoil simultaneously or, one half coiling while the other uncoils from the node originated by the stone, in syncopation. The hardship here is that insects and animals abound. You think of your own. Remember only: it has to do with nodes. You take the

node of something and you relocate the node. The node of the Bultaco, about which all else revolves, is the naugahyde seat. The node of the human is the crotch. The node of the razor blade is the place where you hold it. You can make the seat the engine. You can make the crotch the hand. You can make the place where you hold the razor blade the part of the blade that will not let you hold it.

Leftovers Utah had not known:

That alloy wheels had lately come on the market there in town for motorcycles as well as automobiles. That the node of an animal is its tongue. Nor that a deer, having drunk enough of its own blood, will become a carnivorous animal, and for how long is conjectural.

Critical Praise for the Trilogy  
*If Where You're Going Isn't Home*  
and for Book 1  
*Journey*

~ ~ ~

*Max Zimmer has written The Great American Mormon Novel. For decades, readers have depended upon a few extraordinary writers to understand fully what it means to be an American – Philip Roth, Julia Alvarez, Ralph Ellison, Erica Jong, John Updike. Zimmer has added a critical new dimension to our shared national understanding of who we are and how we got here in this sweeping narrative.*

*Twelve-year-old Shake Tauffler's journey through the Mormon Church and beyond will resonate with all Americans who ponder their soul and place in our changing national portrait.*

~ Michael Strong, literary agent and co-founder of Zola Books ~

~ ~ ~

*Shake's observations reveal the absurdity of fundamentalist logic, the deep-seated racism in Mormon history, and the extraordinary way music can transport us to a different time, mindset, or spiritual state.*

~ Kirkus Reviews ~

~ ~ ~

*Max Zimmer is an exceptionally talented writer and storyteller. Readers from their teens on up, regardless of religion, will identify with Shake as he begins to challenge everything he has been brought up to believe. The beauty of the book's prose ... carries the tale almost flawlessly through the highs and lows of Shake's life. Journey is a thoroughly enjoyable book that satisfies from the very first page. And at the end, it leaves readers begging Zimmer to deliver on his promise, 'to be continued.'*

~ Cheryl M. Hibbard, Five Star Foreword Clarion Review ~