

The Journey Is My Home

by

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Always the journey long patient many haltings
Many waitings for choice and again easy breathing
When the decicion to go on is made
Along the long slopes of choice and again the world

From *Waterlily Fire*

Muriel Rukeyser

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Reckoning

I am at my aunt's house for a party. It has been a festive evening with plenty of food and drink. Especially drink. Especially the men. A friend of my uncle's has brought along a bottle of stingers that he mixed up - brandy and Creme de Menthe - and the men have been knocking those back. They are joking and laughing loudly. My aunt, as always, has made a generous amount of food, and various plates of shrimp, dips, and cheese lie scattered throughout the kitchen and dining room.

After the guests have left, I am sitting in the dining room. My uncle is there too and he has obviously had too much to drink. He has always been a very quiet and self-controlled man, the kind of man who kept his 1950s crewcut well into the 1970s, so he is not silly or falling down. But his eyes are a little glazed and he is talking more than usual in a rambling way. It seems he has to give a speech the following week (I can no longer recall for what) and all he wants to talk about in that speech is how much the education system sucks. When I try to pin him down on

what exactly he thinks is wrong, he can offer nothing concrete, except that everything is bad. The parents are to blame, the teachers are no good, the administrators no better. When I ask him what he thinks should be done he says that's not his problem. By now I am relatively bored with this harangue, though we continue talking. Then he asks me if I know what the real problem is, where it all starts. "No," I say. "The Hebrews," he answers.

I am momentarily so stunned I can't speak but he continues on. The Jews control everything. The Jews control Hollywood, everyone in Hollywood is a Jew. Why do I think Sammy Davis Jr. and Elizabeth Taylor converted to Judaism? They wouldn't have had careers if they hadn't! He tells me the Jews control all the media. "What are they saying?" Whatever they want, he tells me. I'm just blind if I don't see it. This is all so obviously ridiculous and illogical I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

But he doesn't stop there. Did I know Hitler himself never killed a single Jew? "Gee, what about all the ones he had killed?" No, Hitler never knew about that, no one knew, only a few people. (Apparently it took only five people to transport and slaughter millions of people.) And anyway, you couldn't complain about anything then or they would have killed you too. Which is it, I would like to know: no

one knew anything or everyone was too afraid to protest. But it would be pointless to ask.

I don't know where to put him in my mind. I cannot reconcile the man I know with this person. The person I know is a gracious host; he has that European sense of hospitality. You don't walk into his house without immediately being offered coffee, or a drink and something to eat. You don't leave without a plate of cookies or a bag of homegrown apples. My heart is breaking.

* * *

My mother's family comes from a small town in Bohemia in what is now the Czech Republic. At various times through the centuries, this little piece of land has been an independent kingdom, part of the Hapsburg Empire, and part of Czechoslovakia. At the time of my mother's birth, 1938, it was part of - or occupied by, depending on your view - the Third Reich.

I have always thought of my family as Austrian, but of course they didn't live in Austria until after the war. They lived in the small village of St. Thoma in the Sudetenland, a historically German-speaking region in Czechoslovakia. I asked my mother's older sister, Tilli,

how they had thought of themselves, whether as Czechs or Austrians, and she said, "No, no, we were Sudeten Germans." She did not speak Czech growing up, only German, though I notice on a copy of my grandmother's marriage certificate, from 1927, that all the pertinent information is in both languages.

Tilli, born in 1927, is the oldest of my grandmother's own children (my grandmother also had four older stepchildren) and so remembers the most of the time before and during the war. She recalls a very happy childhood, though even as children they had to work a lot. There was no electricity and water had to be carried to the house from a spring-fed well in the town center. They had fields to work and a few animals: four cows, four pigs, two oxen, some sheep, some chickens and ducks. In the fields they had hay and beets for the animals. A lot of cabbage. A vegetable garden where they grew some salad, a few potatoes, rhubarb. Lots of work, every day. By the age of twelve, my aunt could milk cows. She also knew how to sharpen the blade on a scythe, because the hay fields were still mowed by hand.

My grandfather also had a small restaurant where people came on Sunday and where my grandmother served hot soup during the week to schoolchildren who didn't go home

for lunch. Because the town was in a beautifully forested area and there were ruins from an old castle, it was a somewhat popular destination for day-trips, so tourists also stopped in. The restaurant was named after the ruins - Gasthaus zu Ruine Wittingshausen (Restaurant at Wittingshausen Ruins.) The kids were expected to help out in the restaurant as well as in the fields.

She remembers some of the things they served in the restaurant: Speckbrot, which is bread with slices of a kind of smoked bacon. Buttered bread with cheese. Buttermilk. Beer.

"Sausages?" I ask, thinking of the typical quick, inexpensive food I've had in Austrian restaurants.

"No, no, we didn't have refrigeration then; we couldn't serve things like that."

"Chicken?"

"Chicken? Please! Chicken!" And says no more, shaking her head, the question apparently too ridiculous to answer.

Sometimes a group of women came together from all over for what I can only translate as a "feather-pull." They would come on a Saturday or Sunday and the table would be piled high with feathers; the women spent the day pulling the down off the quills to be used for beds and pillows. In the afternoon my grandmother made coffee - then a real

treat, something you generally only got on Sunday - and served some baked goods. Later the men joined them, and someone would play the accordion, and there would be a dance.

Despite all the hard work, she remembers this time fondly. She often spent the night at her grandmother's, in the next town. Her "Oma" would always cook something special or have some candy for her. She participated in church processions, where all the girls would be dressed in white with wreaths in their hair, strewing flower petals from baskets. She went to the small, traveling market that came around once a year with the five Kronen her father could spare for her to buy some candy and ride the carousel.

She also participated in the Bund Deutscher Madel (BDM), which was the girls' version of the Hitler Youth. They did gymnastics and had sport competitions, but her group was very small, not like in the cities. And besides, she tells me, they had so much work to do, they didn't have time to be interested in such things.

I ask her whether she remembers when Hitler annexed the Sudetenland and marched into Czechoslovakia.

"Yes, of course. People stood in the streets and yelled and cheered, 'Heil! Heil!'"

"So they were happy about this?"

"Yes, people were happy. Now there was more work, more food. There were no more beggars; there were so many beggars before, but now they gave out bread."

"The Nazis gave out bread?"

"Yes."

"How was it that there was more work all of a sudden? What did they do?"

"I don't really know. I was still so young. But probably already building armaments and munitions in the factories."

Some time later I read that the Nazis disassembled entire Czech factories and reassembled them in Austria, in Linz, where Hitler was born, and where some of my family settled after the war.

* * *

A different evening at my uncle's, a family dinner. Lots of reminiscing is going on. The talk comes around to my uncle's two older half-brothers, who were old enough to have served in the war; the two people talking would have been small children then.

"Franz, he was an ambulance driver, I think in Poland."

"And Edmund? Edmund was SS, wasn't he?"

"Yes, I think so. I think Edmund was SS."

SS? This is the first I've ever heard this story and I can't believe it. First, I know that my family members were relatively poor country people and I have always thought of the SS as being an elite force, culled from what my grandmother certainly would have referred to as "better people." This seems to me a kind of twisted story, for while I wouldn't say they are prideful in this recounting, there is certainly no shock, no disappointment or shame.

I think that they have exaggerated Edmund's "importance" until a couple months later when I read a book about the Hitler Youth. I find out that the Nazis recruited for the SS from the Hitler Youth and I know that Edmund was in the Hitler Youth. I've seen an old family photograph of him in the HY uniform.

* * *

Being part of the Hitler Youth involved much more than an occasional after-school project. There were constant activities, with a great emphasis on physical fitness and,

of course, on obedience. Young boys were kept busy with long hikes, camping trips, picnics, sports competitions. These may not seem like big events to us today, but in 1933 unemployment was at an all-time high. Many of the parents of these children certainly could not afford to take them to the country for a day trip. Later arms training and military drills were added, and towards the end of the war thirteen to fifteen year-olds were able to man anti-aircraft guns.

The unrelenting activities not only kept young, energetic people from protesting or otherwise causing trouble, and strict hierarchy made perfect training for future soldiers. They were also promised a great future in a great Germany - as long as everyone participated in working towards the same goals. Children were no more than objects to be molded. They were the *tabula rasa* Hitler's thousand-year Reich would be written on.

The admiration was mutual. By the end of Hitler's first year in power, there were 2.3 million members of the Hitler Youth; by 1935 it was 4 million. That was half the population of ten to eighteen year-olds.

And from there, many of them, like my uncle's half-brother, were recruited to the Waffen SS.

* * *

I am talking to my cousin on the phone and I ask her whether she has ever heard this story about Edmund being in the SS. Yes, certainly, she remembers hearing about it when she was growing up. Where was I? I tell her about her father's rant about "the Hebrews" and ask her if she heard much of that growing up. No, never, just the usual prejudices. "You know how the whole family is about Blacks," she says. My uncle is the kind of guy who would say something like, "She's Black, *but* she's nice," and think he was being complimentary. My mother is certainly not above saying "those people" when referring to Blacks or Hispanics.

She does remember that he once acquired recordings of some of Hitler's speeches. She also repeats the family line that Hitler did good things when he was first elected. It was only later that he got "carried away" with power. I can't believe she's saying this.

"Hon, you understand that's not true, don't you? The brutal policies were there right from the start, earlier even, they're there in Mein Kampf, in the 1920s."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

But I don't think she knows how to reconcile this with our family any more than I do.

* * *

How do people try to reconcile the past when they have lived through - and been a part of - such an incredibly heinous time? How do they manage to live with someone who perpetuated unthinkable crimes, or even just let them happen, supporting the people who did the crimes when that someone is a person they have loved?

I've looked at two women who lived through this time and came out of it with two very different self-assessments, one who has tried to truly look back un sentimentally and clear-eyed, and one who repeats the tired old phrases of how no one knew what was going on and no one had any choice in their actions.

Traudi Junge was Hitler's secretary from 1942 until the end of the war. She was not an avid Nazi; in fact she never joined the Nazi party. She was a young woman who wanted to go to dance school and through coincidence and chance secured the secretarial job so she could go to Berlin. In the documentary *Blind Spot*, she talks about how different Hitler was in person from his public persona. To

her he was always kindly, soft-spoken, and friendly. She heard him speak privately of ideals and goals, of the nation and a vast, powerful German Reich. While she was very apolitical, she understood that she was in an incredible situation:" . . . little me sitting across from the great Furor." She had a sense of being part of something grand but also felt subservient to Hitler.

Even so, she slowly began to have doubts as she realized that human life meant nothing to him. Only the supremacy of the German Reich, the triumph of his ideals and visions were important, and the human sacrifice of war was simply the cost of becoming a great empire. But Junge kept her job through the bitter end, not knowing where else to go. In her own words, she was "very conformist." She was still living in the bunker when Hitler, Eva Braun, and others committed suicide rather than face the victors outside the bunker.

Where she differs from many of her fellow Germans is in her self-examination for her part in history. She, like many others, says she did not know of the most horrible crimes being committed, that while she was part of the inner circle, these things were never spoken of in her presence. And in the first few years after the war she felt content that she had no personal guilt, that she had been

young and ignorant. (In fact, while she did go through denazification, she was granted juvenile amnesty.)

But one day she passed a memorial dedicated to Sophie Scholl, a young woman who opposed Hitler. As she read the dedication, she realized that Scholl had been the same age as she herself, and had been arrested and executed the same year Junge started working for Hitler. At that moment she sensed that it is no excuse to be young and that it might have been possible to find out what was going on.

Before her death in 2002, she felt that she was starting to forgive herself.

* * *

More typical is the attitude of Leni Riefenstahl, the filmmaker most well-known for glorifying a mass Nazi rally at Nuremburg in her film *Triumph of the Will* and the only woman to play a significant role in the early years of Nazi power.

In *Triumph of the Will*, Riefenstahl shows her talent for using visual effects to produce interesting images and propaganda. Lighting, camera angles, and editing are all put to meticulous use. There are endless lines of soldiers and Hitler Youth parading streets lined with cheering

crowds, more cheering throngs shouting from every window in the shot, all of them indicating universal support for the Fuhrer.

The well-known Nazi penchant for meticulous organization is also seen, and not just in the massive group formations of marching soldiers. We see the huge, well-run cooking operation of the Hitler Youth camp, gathered there for the rally. Thousands of boys and young men are there. Many of them work together to get food prepared for everyone, cooking in huge pots and dishing out plates of food to smiling, fresh-scrubbed youths. Fresh meat and milk are shown in abundance, and given the economic difficulties of the time, that would have meant something. The message to viewers must have been clear: we take care of our own; we will provide for you abundantly.

Riefenstahl not only feels no remorse for her participation in creating this propaganda piece for Hitler, she denies that either she or the film is in any way political. She claims the film was simply an artistic endeavor on her part. In the film *The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl*, we see her watching *Triumph* as the filmmaker looks on, with her smiling and pointing out the artistic merits of the film. She's so very obviously still in love with her work.

Another trait Riefenstahl shares with many of the participants in the Nazi regime is an inexhaustible ability to feel sorry for herself. It amazes me how often perpetrators of crimes feel sorry for themselves, while the victims feel guilty. She regrets making *Triumph of the Will* not because of its overt political message, but because she was castigated for it after the war and was unable to work as a filmmaker. She claims she has suffered for half a century because of her involvement.

When asked by filmmaker Ray Muller whether she shares any responsibility for what happened or feels any guilt, she becomes defensive. "What should be my responsibility? By that time 90% of the people were in favor of Hitler. What does political responsibility mean? And to whom is one responsible?"

* * *

My family lies squarely in Leni's camp. They are extremely defensive when talking about Germany's past and the German people's own responsibility for what came to pass. Of course, all of the people who I know now were young children during the war; my mother was only one week old when Kristallnacht happened. Yet they seem to venerate

the older generation that was caught up in Nazi ideology, and seem angry when confronted with criticisms of Germany's past, despite its obvious, accursed ending.

The only thing I seem to be able to attribute this to is their own authoritarian upbringing. In what was a common practice at the time, they were raised to revere their parents, to never disagree, and certainly never be angry with them. Children's main interaction with a parent was simply to do what they were told; they certainly weren't entitled to an opinion of their own. This attitude is so ingrained in them that even to this day, any thought of parental criticism is unfathomable to them. Admitting that their father and older half-brothers had knowingly bought into a brutal, fascistic ideology is more than they can manage. To them, to reject the ideology would be to reject their family.

In reading a book about the children of Nazi bigwigs, I see this theme played out over and over. Repeatedly, referring to their father's, and often their own, upbringing, the phrases "authoritarian household" and "brutal upbringing" are used. And many of them downplay or outright deny their father's part in Nazi history, even with overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Even Hermann Göring's daughter claims her father was never fanatical.

Always, it is "the others" in the party who were the bad people.

* * *

I never heard about the atrocities growing up; not at school, certainly not at home. What I did hear about were my family's hardships during the war. It wasn't until I was older that I understood their hardships were actually after the war, after they had fled the advancing victors in Sudetenland/Czechoslovakia into Austria with nothing; everything was left behind.

When I was older and spent time in Austria with my grandmother and aunt, I was struck by how their everyday life was still shaped by their experiences during the war. The inability to waste even the smallest amount of food, even when it was on the verge of spoiling. The closets overstuffed because nothing was gotten rid of, even if it no longer fit or the material was falling apart. And every day, some mention of the war, of what they went through afterwards.

But never any mention of Nazi aggression, or of Nazis at all. No mention of my grandfather's party membership or

their own support of the regime that proved so ruinous in the end.

"Father was a real supporter," Tilli tells me. She is the only one who will speak at least somewhat openly of that time.

"But he was *only* in the SA," she adds.

"So overall, you were all for Hitler?"

"Yes, yes, who wasn't for him?"

Later she says, "Everything went so fast. He [Hitler] conquered everything in a whirlwind. Fast, fast. Poland, France, everything overrun. But with Russia he 'bit out his own teeth.' So stupid! He shouldn't have gone to Russia."

"He shouldn't have gone to Poland or France either, but he did."

"Yes, but he managed that. Father always said he shouldn't have gone in to Russia. He [her father] was there in World War I, and he knew what was there. We lost that one too, the first world war."

But even she resorts to the "no one knew anything" line when the subject of the atrocities and the camps come up.

"That they were killing all those Jews, not a soul knew about it. The Jews, that was Hitler's biggest mistake. He shouldn't have done that."

"But people didn't protest."

"No, in Vienna they eagerly helped. Hitler was always a Jew-hater, ever since he was in school. The Jews had plenty and he was poor, and because of that he developed that hate. That's what I read, that it was because of that."

"I'm still mystified by that," she adds. "So stupid. How can you kill so many people? So mean. That you can even bring that off. Children taken from their parents and everything. Heartrending. The biggest disgrace. But they did all that secretly."

When I point out that someone had to know, someone had to build the camps and send the trains there, and that the Matthausen camp was just outside of Linz, she says, "Well, in Linz they might have known, but only the officers. I never heard anything."

And so it goes. I read of a son of a high-ranking Nazi official who expressed his frustration in trying to have an honest conversation with his father: "All I want him to say is, 'In that time I thought it was all right, but now I do not think it is all right.' But he won't say it."

I, too, long to have some honest, thoughtful discussion with my family, an acknowledgment of the reality

of their past, without platitudes or defensiveness. But they won't say it.

The Rifleman

When I was little, I made up elaborate stories about the father I had never met. Sometimes he died in a fatal accident or had a tragic illness; other times he came and took me away with him. I imagined he looked like "*The Rifleman*" from TV. Strong and rugged. Honorable. Always knowing the right thing to do, never getting mad. Once when I was about eight or so, I told my grandmother how my father had died when I was just a baby, and she looked at me as if I were one of the stupider creatures on earth. "That's the first I've ever heard about it," she said.

Over twenty years later I was staring at his phone number, trying to work up my nerve to call him. I had looked for it a long time, poring over library phone books and making countless phone calls to strangers with the same last name. When talking to these people, I would always say I was doing genealogy research and did they know a Joseph Larkins. No, no, no. I would get frustrated, give up for several months, start again. I only had his name to go on; my mother claimed not to remember much else, not even how old he was.

Finally, a man I called in the same town I had lived in until I was nine, said, "Sure, I know him. He lives in Taylorville, Illinois." I thanked him, hung up, called information, and within minutes I had the number I had been looking for for so long.

I was a little stunned. After all the dead-end phone calls, I knew without a doubt that this was the right number, but I felt too nervous to dial it. I poured a glass of wine. I thought about writing him a letter but somehow that didn't seem right. There would be all that waiting for a return letter, and what if one never came? What if he had forgotten me? What if he didn't want to talk to me? What if he did?

At least if I called and he didn't want to talk to me, I would know right away. There would be resolution. I poured another glass of wine and dialed.

"May I speak with Joseph Larkins?"

"This is he."

"Umm, this is Tess. Traudi's daughter."

"My God. I thought I would never talk to you. How did you ever find me?"

He was glad to hear from me, anxious to hear about my life, ready to tell me about himself. It turned out that the person who told me he lived in Taylorville was his son, my half brother Kevin.

"You have four brothers and two sisters."

"You're very prolific."

"I guess I am. You know my family goes back to revolutionary times. An aunt of mine did this whole genealogy thing. I'll send you a copy. You could join the Daughters of the American Revolution, if you want."

"Gee, me and Eleanor Roosevelt in the same club."

"I guess I'd be disappointed if you really wanted to join. But if you ever get the urge to wear flower print dresses and big floppy hats, you're eligible."

He had a million questions for me. Yes, I went to college. No, I moved away from there; I live in San Francisco now. No, I never married.

"Does your mother still play the accordion? She was taking lessons when I knew her."

"Are you kidding?" I get a weird flash of my mother belting out *Lady of Spain* on the accordion.

"She was getting to be pretty good when she left me."

"Wow. No, she didn't keep that up."

We talked on. We discovered we shared a love for books, photography, and cats. He was divorced. Four times. He wanted me to meet his kids.

I felt a little giddy. The moment was exciting and sparkling, like champagne popping.

But in the back of my mind were the darker questions, the ones I didn't want to spoil the moment by asking. Why didn't you come see me? Help me? Love me?

"Your mother blamed me, you know. For getting her pregnant."

"She usually acted like she blamed me."

* * *

My mother didn't want to get married and she didn't want to get pregnant. She only got half her wish.

I didn't live with her until I was almost twelve. Until I was nine I lived with my mother's sister, in a small town in Ohio. My aunt's husband lived there too, and helped raise me, until they divorced when I was about seven or eight. I don't remember that really, just one day he was

gone and I didn't see him anymore. I only remember him visiting one time. He sat in his car and handed me a present through the window - a little, stuffed black poodle that had a transistor radio inside. A little button on its tummy so you could turn it on. He never even got out of the car, just drove away. Other than my made-up father, my uncle was the only father figure I knew, and now he was gone too.

My mother lived about an hour away in Toledo and she would visit on weekends. After I was born, she went to beauty school and now worked as a hairdresser. She had long nails and short skirts, and looked younger and prettier than other mothers I knew. She would come on Saturday and bring her laundry and my aunt would wash it for her. I don't remember her ever playing games or playing with my dolls with me. Sometimes she would try to make me sit at the table until I finished eating something I didn't want to eat, trying to be "Mom" for the one day a week she was there. Still, when she left on Sunday afternoon, I would sit in the yard and cry as she drove away. I didn't understand why I couldn't live with my mom the way other kids did.

Once in a while my mother would pick me up and I would spend the night in her apartment. No playing there either, but sometimes there would be outings. We went to the zoo once and I vaguely remember some guy being there - apparently someone she was dating. She would also take me to restaurants. My favorite was the Betsy Ross coffee shop where I always got little triangles of French toast, sprinkled with powdered sugar and served with a small, melting ball of salty butter. At dinner I could order a Shirley Temple and I felt very grown-up in a pretty dress with a sparkly drink in front of me.

I don't remember ever talking about my father.

During this time I was plagued by scary dreams, often about falling. In the dream, I would trip or fall off a bike, and I would keep falling and falling, never hitting the ground. I would feel the panic in the pit of my stomach as I fell through the air with the realization that there was nothing to hang on to.

Conversely, during my waking hours, I sincerely believed that what I was living was a dream, and that I would eventually wake up and be with my real family.

* * *

When I was nine, for reasons I could never discern, I was sent to live with my grandmother and a different aunt in Austria. It was around the end of May when I got there. I didn't speak any German and no one there spoke English. In September I started school with the little bit of German I managed to pick up over the summer.

Despite the initial language barrier - and the fact that I was living with people who were virtual strangers - I liked living in Austria. I now think of that time as my two years of childhood. It was a small town and I had a lot of freedom to run around wherever I liked. There were fields and a creek to play in, and dense woods where I built a fort out of twigs and small branches, and then carpeted it with the thick moss I pulled off a boulder.

My life there was typical for small town life at that time. We had a big garden and my grandmother raised rabbits. I helped to feed them and I even tried to learn how to mow grass for them with a scythe, the way my grandmother did. I picked raspberries that got made into syrup, and climbed up into the apple tree and daydreamed for long periods.

While my aunt and my grandmother were not physically affectionate - no hugging or cuddling in that house - they were good to me and easygoing. I didn't get the negative attention I usually got in Ohio, where I somehow always felt wrong, felt like I didn't belong.

Here, ironically, I did not feel like an outsider. I learned German quickly, enough to do well in school and make friends. The town was small enough that people I didn't know knew who I was, and I would sometimes hear the word "Amerikannerin" (American girl) float by me when I walked around town, as people pointed me out. I didn't have bad dreams anymore.

At the end of my second year in Austria I was told that I was going back to America to live with my mother. I didn't want to go. I was happy where I was. "Don't you want to live with your mother?" people would ask. "No," I would tell them. But I didn't get a vote.

Shortly before I left my grandmother's, I packed up my Barbie dolls and a small black and white Teddy bear I had had since I was a toddler, and gave them to a younger cousin. Looking back now I think that somehow, inside, I knew, at eleven, that I wouldn't need my dolls anymore. The time for play was over.

* * *

After my initial contact with my father, we kept in touch by phone and letters. He sent me all sorts of odds and ends. Family pictures and the promised genealogy information. Pottery he had made in college. Once he sent me a bird feeder with the note, "I'm sending you a finch feeder. They're lovely birds. I hope you have them there." I sent a Father's Day card for the first time. We started making plans to meet.

About a week after our initial phone call, I had a letter from his mother. I opened it slowly, not sure what to expect. With shaky letters, a woman I had never met wrote:

"My Dear Grand-daughter:

Joe called to let me know he had heard from you. He was overjoyed and I am too."

Over the next two years we exchanged letters, attempting to make-up for lost time. She would write about her youth, and working for the telephone company, and meeting my grandfather. She wrote about sadness that had

touched her life. Three of her adult children had died within a two-year period in the mid-eighties. Earlier a baby had died: "My little girl Jane Marie died in infancy." Her husband was gone, as were her brothers, though her sisters were still well enough to visit her occasionally. Eventually I was able to meet her, and I had the chance to visit her several times before she died. It still makes me angry that she only lived twenty minutes away from where I lived as a child, and I never knew her.

As I started telling people I knew about talking to my father for the first time, I was amazed at the number of people with similar stories of meeting long lost relatives, most often fathers. For various reasons - divorce, adoption, sheer abandonment - people had completely lost touch with someone and gone looking to reconnect. I didn't know my father because my mother never wanted him to see me. He was just supposed to send his child support and stay out of the way. If I asked about him - what did he look like, what did he do - she would get angry, and then I would get the silent treatment. We were always at odds, and not just on the subject of my father. It wasn't long before I quit asking about him, or anything else, and retreated into books.

* * *

Toledo, Ohio 1970. A two-bedroom apartment in a big complex. A small swimming pool. I could walk to school and to a nearby shopping center. There was still an old Kresge Five and Dime there; my best friend and I would go there for fries and milkshakes after school. At first I felt funny speaking English again after two years away. It took me a while to switch language gears.

My mother was still a hairdresser (they weren't called stylists then,) though by now she has her own beauty shop.

I did not feel comfortable with my mother. I felt like nothing I ever did was right. I never saw my mother look at me with pride or affection. She seemed somehow angry or frustrated most of the time and I never felt that she liked me. In fact once, when she was mad at me yet again for something I did, she said: "Maybe I'm supposed to love you but I don't have to like you." More than once I wonder why she didn't just leave me in Austria.

My first day back from Austria, my mother showed me my bedroom. There was a beige couch that folded out into a bed, a desk, and a dresser. On the dresser was an

elephant made out of paper flowers. Then my mother showed me a small framed picture. "This is our friend," she said. "Frank." *Our* friend. Then, "Sometimes when he comes over, maybe you can go ride your bike."

Frank turns out to be a married man twenty years her senior. As always in these situations, she was at his beck and call, while he was free to do what he wanted. Despite being a self-supporting businesswoman, she is subservient when it comes to men. She referred to him as "The King" and my apparently crazy extended family went along with this. (Except for me. I will always sarcastically refer to him as Burger King.)

When I first lived with her, she actually wanted me to put his slippers on his feet for him. Even at eleven I knew that was twisted and I steadfastly refused to touch him.

He, however, had no such qualms. He was always trying to feel me up, always had his hands on my shoulders or arms. I walked around my entire adolescence with my shoulders hunched over, trying to protect myself.

Once when she had left for work, he was still in the apartment. I don't remember if he spent the night or came over early in the morning. He came into my room and laid down beside me. I was lying on my back. He tried to touch

my breasts but I had my arms crossed in front of me. He told me to move my arms. I didn't say anything, but I wouldn't move my arms. After a while he got up and left the room. I could hear him stomping around as if he were angry, as if I were the one who had done something wrong. I stayed in my room until I heard him leave. I wanted to disappear.

Years later I told a therapist I was lucky he didn't do anything worse to me; he easily could have been more forceful. She said, "You weren't lucky. These creeps know exactly who they can pick on. Something in your manner let him know you wouldn't keep your mouth shut." He did, however, continue to feel me up, make comments about my body, and tell dirty jokes, generally in front of my mother, who never said a word about it.

As creepy as he was, mostly what I think now is, "What kind of person leaves her young daughter alone with a fifty-two year old adulterer?"

* * *

Throughout that time, I mostly stopped wondering about my father. My bad dreams returned, bizarre images that would wake me up several times a night, and I lived in a

withdrawn, self-protective mode. Most of the time I had my nose in a book and tried to be as invisible as I could be.

It wasn't until I moved across the country, to San Francisco, and was far away from my mother that I began again to think about, and search for, my father.

About eight months after I contacted my father when we made plans to finally meet. I lived in Denver by then, and he was to drive out and spend a few days with me.

I made plans for various outings. He liked antiques, so we went to a district that had one antique shop after another. I got us tickets to go to the Ringling Brothers circus. By sheer coincidence, a group of the circus performers had dinner at the restaurant where I worked two days before my father arrived. When they learned I was taking him to the circus, they invited me to bring him backstage after the show. We ended up getting a tour of all the props, and all the performers signed our program.

I worked at an Indian restaurant then, and it turned out my Dad loved the food there. The cooks took a liking to him and taught him how to wind a Sikh turban and make naan in the tandoor oven.

We made plans to get together at Christmas, and for him to introduce me to my half-brothers and sisters. But

shortly before Christmas, he called to say he didn't feel well enough to go to Ohio. He still wanted me to meet his kids - he had told them about me - but I would have to go on my own.

On my way to Ohio I stopped in Illinois to visit him for a couple days. He didn't seem sick, and he wanted to go out and do things. He took me to meet his girlfriend. We hadn't been there very long when he wanted to leave, pleading fatigue. Yet on the way home he said, "Let's stop here," and pulled into a bar. That was my first glimpse of his alcoholism.

As much as it freaked me out, I did go meet my siblings, as well as their mother, by myself. All in all, it went pretty well. They were accepting of me, and I enjoyed time with my nieces. My dad's ex-wife always knew about me. He married her not long after my mother refused to marry him. In fact, I had already noticed on the genealogy papers that there was only a four month difference between their first child and me.

Despite telling me that he would have seen a lot of me given the chance, my father didn't do such a great job keeping in touch with the kids he did have access to after his divorce. One of my brothers told me that once my father

had come to see them and my brother at first didn't recognize him. He thought it was my father's brother coming through the door.

My brothers and sisters were all angry that he hadn't come for Christmas. They didn't believe he was sick. They already knew what I was just starting to learn: it's a lot easier to drink what you want when you're not surrounded by family. After waiting all that time to meet him, it was hard to admit that alcohol was more important to him than his children.

* * *

People say you can't miss what you never had. I don't believe it. I still feel a hole inside me where family should be. As good as it was to meet and get together with my siblings, they didn't stay in touch, despite my various efforts. That was painful for me. I guess somewhere in my unrealistic heart, I had wanted to have the family I never had growing up.

I remember that first phone call. "I've thought about you all these years," he said. "Especially on your birthday. I'm so glad you called."

I'm glad too, despite the alcohol-slurred phone calls, the birthdays that came and went without a card or a call, the unanswered letters. But at least I had a father and a history, and best of all, however briefly, I had my grandmother.

On my answering machine there was another slurry-voiced message. Most of it was unintelligible, but he did tell me he loved me. I was so hurt and so angry that he only called me up when he was drunk. I didn't call him back. I never spoke to him again. My brother called me two weeks later to tell me he had died.

He wasn't *The Rifleman* I had imagined. He wasn't strong and rugged, and he would never come take care of me. He was flawed. Lonely. Needy. Just like me. My father's daughter.

Yet Another Road Trip Story

In Southern Colorado, large hills of sand lie in front of the Sangre de Christo Mountains, the remnant of an old, dried up riverbed that was blown out of the basin but came up against the mountain range. What an odd, lovely pair they make. I am the only person crazy enough to be camping at the Great Sand Dunes National Monument - it is freezing cold. But beautiful. At night, the full moon on the sand creates an eerie landscape. In the morning there is frost on the windows of my van and I see my first mule deer. They stop in the middle of the road and we eye each other curiously. It is much too windy to walk out to the dunes. I stay another day, hoping the wind will die down but the next day is just as bad so I move on.

This is my first stop on what I hope will be an extended trip through the Southwest. Just a few hours out of Denver and I've already had a crying jag. While trying to cook dinner, I let a little too much propane out before

I get the stove lit, resulting in a small explosion that scares me to death. It is so cold I can't get to sleep, despite the feather comforter I have with me. I haven't saved nearly the amount of money I wanted to have for this trip. I've left good friends back in Denver. It is my first day out and I am sitting in my van crying, wondering what the hell I've gotten myself into.

* * *

My desire to travel intensified on the occasion of my thirtieth birthday. I had always wanted to drive cross-country. I thought, "I wanted to do this when I was twenty. If I don't do it now I will turn forty and still not have done it." This jumping off into the unknown seems to me a quintessentially American experience. The wide expanse of our country seems to make us believe there is always something more beyond the horizon.

Maybe this is because our nation was founded by people willing to sail off into the unknown. Or maybe it is that we think we are each solely responsible for our own destinies and we want to look for them without attachment

to place or others. Perhaps it is our conviction in self-reliance that drives us from home. Henry David Thoreau said that he went to live in the Concord woods to “. . . live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.” We pursue our desires not just for the American Dream of prosperity but to become who we think we are. We go to find out what we are made of.

In Denver, I buy a twenty-two year old hippie bus - a classic 1968 VW camper van. The back seat folds down into a bed and there is a tiny closet and a stove. It still has an 8-track player. I pack a few clothes but mostly I load up with books and cooking staples: sugar, cornmeal, rice, coffee, spices, cooking oil, a few canned goods. I buy lots of film, sunscreen, maps. All of my adult life I have been a city girl - I have lived the last year in Denver and in San Francisco for seven years before that. I have been camping once in my life and never alone so I pick up a used copy of a Boy Scout Handbook. I figure it covers all emergencies. I have \$700 for the trip.

* * *

After I leave the Sand Dunes I go to Taos. I walk around the Plaza, ducking in and out of stores and cafes, trying to warm up. But two nights in frost and wind have chilled me so much I can't seem to get warm. I decide to stay at a hostel that night; there is one in Pilar, between here and Santa Fe. I figure I'll get some hot Mexican food once I get there. However, in Pilar there is only the hostel on the side of the highway. I walk behind the hostel and there, down a hill, down a dirt road, are a few scattered houses, a church, and four artists' galleries. "Gallery" is a bit of a fancy word for these; they are really just artists' homes and studios where they sell their work. No restaurant, no store, no gas.

After a hot shower I feel better and make my way down to the hostel kitchen to fix dinner. A young couple - younger than my van, in fact - is cooking canned spaghetti with hot dogs cut into it for dinner. She's German, he's Australian. I am making spicy Indonesian peanut noodles. They eye my pan suspiciously as I put peanut butter in the sauce. They give each other a "look" - not quite an eye-roll but clearly a look. They make a point of sitting at the other end of the table.

In the morning, I walk down the dirt road, along the Rio Grande, to a sturdy little church that is graceful and simple, adobe with old wooden beams and lace curtains in the windows. I climb the hill behind the church and there, on the boulders, half hidden in graffiti, are petroglyphs left by ancient peoples. Indecipherable rust colored figures. I sit and wonder what story the painter was trying to tell. Was it a solitary telling, like my writing in my journal at night, alone in my van? Was he trying to make sense of his own life, his dreams, his troubles? Or was it communal, like the murals in East L.A., a collective tale of the vision and history of his people? I wonder whether he sat here alone, as I do, taking in the beauty of the Rio Grande gorge. Did he worry about the quality of his art, wonder if anyone would like it, wonder if they would understand? Did it occur to him that someone a thousand years later would be gazing at his work?

After I ponder all this for a while I walk back down the hill and there is the story of newer people: litter. I will see this everywhere I go, no matter how isolated a spot. It is always the same: liquor bottles, cigarette butts and packs, and fast food containers.

I spend a very brief time in Santa Fe. It is a beautiful town but I am anxious to be out of the city, back on the land. I go to some galleries and to a great folk art museum but the very best thing there is the Frito Pie served at the Woolworth's on the Plaza. Here's the recipe:

Slit open a small bag of Frito chips. Right into the bag, on top of the chips, dump a ladleful of red chile con carne. Sprinkle with cheese and chopped onions. Eat with a spoon right out of the bag while walking around the plaza taking in the color of the New Mexico sky.

Despite wanting to get on to southern New Mexico, I stop in the town of Chimayo, about 35 miles from Santa Fe. There is a church there that is supposed to have holy dirt that heals the sick and the lame; the devout make pilgrimages on foot from Santa Fe on Good Friday. The building looks like other old Mission churches - small, smooth, wooden pews, statues of saints, an ornate altar, candles to be lit for 25 cents. To the left of the altar is a small room lined with the discarded crutches of the healed believers along with pictures of saints, photos of those in need, and notes asking for help and guidance. Adjoining this room is another small room and there, in a

hole in the floor, is the holy dirt. A couple is there. He is sobbing and praying; she is scooping holy dirt into a baggie. After he collects himself, he sees me in the next room and tells me to pray here, to touch the dirt, my prayers will be answered. "It works," he says. I thank him and when he leaves without babbling at me further, I thank God.

Down the street from the church I buy a cola and some milagros. I ask the clerk how there can possibly still be holy dirt left in that small hole if people are scooping it out every day. He tells me new dirt gets brought in and when I wonder whether that would still have the same healing qualities, being from somewhere else, he says, "Well, they bless it specially." Why don't they do that to all the dirt, everywhere, I wonder.

After this, my trip seems to take on its own rhythm. When I find a good camping site - good being beautiful and free - I stay a couple weeks. With no job to get to and no itinerary, calendars and clocks have no meaning for me. I proceed at my own natural pace, waking up with the sun, falling asleep looking at the stars outside the van windows. The nervousness I felt when I started out is gone; suddenly it seems perfectly natural to be in the middle of

nowhere with nothing more than an ancient van and a few bucks to get me back to somewhere. Sometimes I feel lonely but not more often than I did living by myself in a city apartment. Maybe even less often, since here I have no social expectations. I strike up conversations easily with the few other campers I come across; there is none of the self-consciousness I usually feel when talking to strangers. I'm not sure yet whether something in me has changed or whether I am comfortable because I know I will never see these people again. At any rate, there is an ease in me that feels new.

* * *

I begin to develop a routine. In the morning I spread out an old blanket and stretch while my water boils for coffee. I sit and drink my coffee out of a beautiful china cup I've brought with me. I have crackers and jam and listen to the stillness that surrounds me. After washing my dishes, I head out for a hike before it gets too hot. On the rare days when it is rainy and cold I go back to bed with coffee and Steinbeck, comparing his America with mine.

Late afternoons I work on the jean jacket I am embroidering or I read. I have brought an odd assortment of books with me, no rhyme or reason, everything from Colette to Thoreau to Vonnegut. My favorite is M.F.K. Fisher's *How to Cook a Wolf*. Fisher's coping with wartime shortages during World War II is helping me to live graciously with my self-imposed economies. I try some of her recipes - sardine pie, corn chowder - but it is her beautiful writing and her enjoyment of honest food simply prepared that inspires me. I learn to appreciate the meals I make on my little stove in the van. Fisher says anyone who has come through a war (I would say any lean times) knows that eggs, butter, meat, and spices are "precious substance[s] not lightly to be wasted." But she claims this is good because ". . . there can be no more shameful carelessness than with the food we eat for life itself. When we exist without thought or thanksgiving we are not men, but beasts."

In my previous life as a city girl, I ate out often and kept up with what the latest chefs were doing in the newest restaurants. Now I only go to a store every couple weeks when I change camp sites, which are too far from any town to warrant going more often. Since I don't have refrigeration and I am on an extremely tight budget, I shop

very carefully. First I pick out a few fresh vegetables that will hold for a couple days on ice in a cooler. After that I need things that will keep - canned goods and root vegetables. Scrambled eggs are a luxury. Some nights I build a campfire, cut a yam in half, sprinkle it with olive oil, chopped garlic, salt, and pepper, wrap it in foil, and throw it in the embers until it is tender. I eat it out under the bright, clear New Mexico sky and nothing ever tasted better.

Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher's Sardine Pie:

1/2 pound sausage (or 1/2 can sardines)

tomato sauce

biscuit mix

1 teaspoon grated onion or chopped green onion

Spread sausage (or fish) thin in pie-pan or shallow casserole (in camping situations use a cast iron pan.) Let heat in a quick oven and pour off almost all fat. (Leave oil on sardines.)

Make one-half usual baking powder biscuit, mixing it with tomato sauce instead of milk or water. Add the onion and any chopped herbs you like. Pour over sausage (or sardines)

and bake in hot oven until firm and brown. (Or cover and bake in campfire embers.)

As I travel from campsite to campsite, I make a point of stopping at small town festivals or events. A Lion's Club chuck wagon dinner of chicken-fried steak with all the fixins - beans, slaw, fries - \$4.50. An all-you-can-eat pancake breakfast at a fire station. My favorite was an elementary school enchilada dinner in Hatch, New Mexico (Chile Capital of the World.) It's three bucks and it's a fundraiser for the 6th grade class. Two young girls take my order and money and give me a number. No one seems in any hurry to bring the food out so I sit and watch and listen.

"We haven't had an enchilada dinner in a long time, huh?"

"No, Jack, I think the last one was a couple years ago down to the high school."

Some people look at me curiously; they know I'm not from there.

"You just move here, or something? You visiting?"

"No, I'm just passing through."

No one says it but I can see them wondering how the hell I ended up at their 6th grade enchilada dinner which, when it finally arrives, is actually quite good.

I stop at a 24-hour truck stop in Tularosa where I can park for the night. I have an awful burger surrounded by awful people. In a booth by the window a dad has a French fry in one hand and a cigarette in the other; he is blowing smoke all over his kids' faces and yelling at them. The bleach-blond mom is blowing smoke all over the food and she doesn't have anything too pleasant to say either. At another table a child of three or four is desperately trying to talk to his father who, also smoking, is staring vacantly, silently out the window. The waitress looks worn out from having seen too many of these people, from being on her feet too long, from wanting just a little peace and quiet. What makes them so weary? They live a short distance from the mountains where I have been camping in serenity. Do they ever go there? Do they see the beauty of their surroundings? Or where I see beauty do they simply see a hard land, difficult to coax a living out of? How long will it be before their children are weary too? Before they find themselves blowing smoke at their own kids, wondering

where their lives slipped away to? Dejected before they ever even have a chance.

These people have made me sad and in the morning I look forward to moving on. But a friendly, unweary sort in the hardware store, who has been showing me pictures of the town from the 1920s he has on display, tells me it is the weekend of the Tularosa Rose Festival. It promises to be an old-fashioned, small town celebration, complete with a parade, a Rose Queen, and cheesy carnival rides. It sounds like the antidote to the truck-stop that I need, so I stick around.

VFW guys carrying flags lead the parade. There are various floats made by civic organizations and clubs. Then baton twirlers, cowboys on horseback, the Shriners in their tiny cars, the ubiquitous politicians. And, of course, the Rose Queen. Like beauty queens everywhere she has curled, teased hair held in place by numerous applications of hairspray. She wears too much make-up, has a never flagging smile (a dab of Vaseline on the teeth keeps the lips from drying out) and the standard, stiff-wristed beauty queen wave. But then I see a float of baby beauty queens, only three and four years old. It is a hot day and they are riding in the sun wearing make-up and frilly dresses and

heavy capes. I want to kidnap them and wash their make-up off and take them to the carnival for junk food and rides.

I wander around the carnival, listening to the hawkers, breathing in the scents of corn dogs, funnel cakes, and cotton candy. A little kid is eyeing the Ferris wheel with sad desire. The old carni operating the lever, cigarette hanging out of the side of his mouth, tells the kid, "Get on." The little kid's sister says, "He doesn't have a ticket." The old guy ignores her, tells the kid again. The little boy laughs and runs to the seat before the carni has time to change his mind. I wander around until mid-afternoon and it is fun, but some of the weariness of the truck stop lingers on. When I spot a pay phone I decide I need to hear familiar voices. My friends are kind enough to accept my collect calls; they are quite supportive of my catchpenny journey. I catch up on work gossip - a busboy has run away from home but he is caught and returns to work with his hair still dyed from an attempted disguise. A friend's son has gotten big enough to have his own trike. My nieces want to know when I will come see them. After several calls I feel renewed and am once again anxious to be out on the land. I head out for the Lincoln National Forest.

I drive around on ever more remote dirt roads, no plan, just looking for a place that appeals to me. I find a little campsite between the road and a creek. By "campsite" I mean I flat area to park or pitch a tent with an outhouse at one end. There is a small, wooden bridge going across the creek that leads to a path that goes up a wooded bluff. While I am hiking up there, the woods suddenly open up to a meadow. Wild strawberries there are just beginning to flower. I can't believe I'm in desert country; it looks just like the land around my grandmother's home in Austria.

The first two nights I am the only person camping there. On the third day, two guys show up who camp down by me, and two more come but they haul all their stuff up the bluff and camp there. The two by me are quiet, nice. A couple married guys out for a weekend away from wives and kids, they spend most of the day off on some trails where they can dirt-bike.

Two days after this, a whole pickup truck full of drunk boys shows up. They make a lot of noise getting out of the truck, stomping around, and finally head up the bluff. I'm not crazy about this development but I also don't really want to leave. By now it is late afternoon and leaving would require not just finding my way out of here

but finding a new place to camp in the dark. I decide to wait and find out whether the married guys are staying another night; if they are then I'll stay too. I didn't mind being the only one camping here, but I don't want to be the only one here with a truck full of drunk boys.

While I am mulling this over in front of a campfire one of the original two guys who camped on the bluff comes walking towards me. He is wearing fatigues.

"Ma'am," he says, "have these boys been bothering you?"

"No," I say.

"I thought I heard a gun go off," he says.

"Yeah, the one guy is really drunk. He fired it in the air when they pulled up."

"I think they're all drunk."

"Yes, but the one guy is a lot more drunk than the others."

"Well Ma'am," he says, "I just want you to know that me and my buddy are both armed and we can take care of any situation that might come up. They give you any trouble,

you just holler. I wouldn't hesitate to fire a round into any of them."

"Um. . . thank you."

Great, I thought. Now I've got two armed Rambos up there, and a passel of drunks, at least one of whom is also armed. There is going to be bloodshed. I hear the gun go off one more time but it gets quiet after that. I hope they're passed out and not dead. The married guys come back, they're staying another night, and we cook dinner together over the campfire. There is no more drama from either of the "bluff" groups and in the morning the boys slink their sorry, hung-over selves on home.

Over my morning coffee I think about my first night at the Sand Dunes, when I cried over being cold and alone and setting off a mini-explosion in the van. Then I think about last night, how I calmly sat at a campfire while a drunk randomly fired a gun into the air and a fellow camper let me know he was armed to the teeth. I think about how confident I feel now, taking care of myself, giving myself this chance to live out this dream I've had for so long. Lots of people think about doing something like this but not many actually do it; I feel proud of myself for making this work. But then a little worm of doubt works its way

into my brain. Is this really a newfound composure or am I just too stupid to get out of harm's way?

* * *

The year before I began this adventure, I became a gardener for the first time. I delighted in watching tiny sprouts pushing their way through the soil, sprung from a tiny seed I had put there. I spent early mornings in my garden, weeding and observing my plants, and evenings poring over gardening books. So I am happy and pleasantly surprised to see the desert teeming with plant life. I had expected a much more barren, sand-swept place - an idea no doubt formed from old Beau Geste movies. By the time I cross into Texas to the Guadalupe National Park, the skinny stalks of ocotillo are blooming. Long, sunlight-colored grass grows in little bunches along the trail. Another camper tells me this is called Loving grass and though I know it is named after an early rancher the name delights me. He tells me the Sierra Club fought to keep ranchers out of the park to save it and I tell him, "Good Loving is never easy to keep." He laughs and admits this is so.

Later in Big Bend, I take a ranger-led plant hike and after that I am able to identify agave, creosote, desert willow, and candelilla. Along the Rio Grande, further south, the prickly pear blossoms have already turned to fruit. An old Mexican man is walking along the river too, and though I don't speak any Spanish I understand enough when he points to the prickly pear and asks, "Tu quieres?" "Si," I tell him. He picks a branch off a nearby creosote bush and uses it to brush the tiny, stinging hairs off the pear. Then he picks it, peels it with his pocketknife, and hands it to me. It is garnet-colored and sweet and delicious. When I get ready to move on he asks me for a kiss but he looks ready to really lay a wet one on me so I quickly shake his hand instead.

There is more wildlife than I expected too. Every day I see mule deer. Occasionally jackrabbits. One or two coyotes. Once I saw a spider so big I saw it in the road while I was driving. Ditto a huge orange snake - I had to stop the van and let it slither out of my lane to avoid hitting it. But the best are the hummingbirds. Whenever I wear my red t-shirt a hummingbird buzzes me. She flies straight at me, stopping only about a foot away, then stares at me for several seconds before realizing I'm not a

huge red flower sent to her from heaven. I feel bad disappointing her even as I dote on seeing her.

Before leaving the Guadalupe Mountains, I stop at a small wooden building that houses a store and gas station. The lady inside tells me this has been a Chevron station since 1928. I notice some small wooden shacks in the back and she tells me that those used to be motel cabins and I am welcome to look around. Some of them are falling apart but some still have beautiful furniture in them - old wooden headboards, dressers, and vanities.

One shack was apparently a storeroom/pantry. There are jarred peaches in there that must be forty years old. The jar tops are rusty and the liquid has turned gray and yet I can see what once were glorious, golden peaches. I wonder why they were just abandoned. Why would someone go to the trouble of home canning and then leave it all behind? Did these people move on in search of work? But in hard times wouldn't you take all your food? (I think of Ma Joad roasting chicken bones for her hungry family to chew on.) Or maybe they lived in a time when home canning wasn't considered a bother, but just something everyone did and homemade goods weren't considered worth the trouble of moving. Still, why do people simply abandon hearth and

home? Why did I? Somehow I want these ghost people to have what I don't: a reason to stay put.

* * *

On my way to Big Bend National Park, I stop in the town of Balmorhea (population 655.) It is 101 degrees so I stop in the small, old-fashioned drug store for something cold to drink. There is still a real soda fountain there and damned if the old guy there doesn't make me a lime coke to order, from the syrup, for 50 cents. He tells me he has worked there since he was twelve years old and he has owned the place since 1940. He worked there when filling a prescription meant more than just counting out pills; he had to actually make the remedies. On one wall he has made a display of old potions and elixirs that he has hauled out of a storeroom. Things like Aqua Drin nose drops and Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound (A baby in every bottle!) He has an old framed picture of President Roosevelt. He had a case of them, he tells me, but they all sold except this one. On his storefront window it says "Antique Soda Fountain." "I wanted to put 'and Antique Soda Jerk,'" he

says, "but, well, I got a lady working for me and I thought she might not like that very much."

He tells me of when the population was four times what it is now but then they built the Interstate. No more traffic came through town, business dried up, young people moved away. He also tells me about a great spring-fed pool down at the state park, built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. I was going to move on but it is so hot I decide to go down there for a swim. The park is so beautiful and the water so cool that I spend the rest of the day there. School has just let out so a number of teenagers lounge around. The young girls are just beginning to know how good they look in their brand new swimsuits, just realizing what that can mean. They strut by self-consciously, not yet confident of their new, ripening bodies. The young boys pretend to be too cool to talk to them but they eye the girls intently from across the pool, from behind their sunglasses.

Back on the road to Big Bend, I follow the river. In the distance the Chisos mountains rise up from the desert. Between the river and the road there is a narrow strip of land and small jewels of green fields manage to flourish; the other side of the road is brown desert. In Lajitas I

decide to spend the night. For the first time on this trip I wish I had more money - it is so hot I want an air-conditioned motel room. As it is, I wake up in the van throughout the night and pour water on myself to try to cool off.

Once in the park, I camp in Santa Elena canyon. I know there cannot be another human being for twenty miles in any direction. I spread my blanket on the desert floor and lie down. Out here, away from the lights of cities and towns, I can see the stars so clearly and distinctly. I regret not knowing the constellations but I enjoy their beauty nonetheless. I am tempted to sleep outside but I think of rattlesnakes and scorpions and get in the van when I feel myself nodding off.

Santa Elena is right on the Rio Grande. Down at the river, a kid in a rowboat takes me over to Mexico for a buck. The town over there is tiny - just a dirt road lined with adobe houses (some of which have satellite dishes perched beside them.) A young couple crosses at the same time I do and we decide to have lunch together. The "restaurant" consists of a few tables set up in someone's extra room. I order chicken mole. While waiting for our food, the couple I'm with tell me about Pablo Acosta. He

was a big drug lord along the border, purportedly bringing in sixty tons of cocaine a year at his height. He had a huge house in Ojinaga but he had a little adobe hide-out right in this town and this is where the Federales caught up with him and killed him in a shootout. The woman serving us tells us only a big pile of rubble is left where it happened - the house collapsed a few months ago. After we eat we walk by the ruin and then try to get a beer, but the guy who sells beer doesn't seem to be home so we head back to the rowboat.

Santa Elena Chicken Mole

Toast in a small pan about 3/4 cup almonds, 1/3 cup sesame seeds, and 1/3 cup pumpkin seeds. Next toast 1 teaspoon cumin seeds, 1 teaspoon anise seeds, 1 tablespoon chile seeds, 1 teaspoon coriander seeds, 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon, 1/4 teaspoon cloves, some chopped garlic, and 1 or 2 corn tortillas.

Grind/puree all these ingredients together along with a small can of tomatillos, adding some chicken stock to make a smooth paste. Then make a chile paste, using either dried whole chiles or, in a pinch, chile powder. Various

chiles can be used - a combination of pasillas, anchos, and mulatos is quite good. Put both the pastes in a pot; add some stock.

Bring to a simmer and add Mexican chocolate. About two ounces is good; you don't want too much, just enough to give the sauce depth and mystery. Pour the sauce over some browned chicken pieces and bake until the chicken is done. This recipe is best suited to a food processor and therefore not good road trip food; however, one bite of the dark, velvety sauce and you will feel yourself back under the desert sky.

* * *

I spend about a week in my isolated camping spot and then I head up to the more developed part of the park further up the mountain. It is an incredible drive. I start out in the desert surrounded by the cacti and small bushes that grow there. As I climb the mountain, small trees start to appear; further up they become taller and denser and finally give way to the pines - ponderosa, pinon, and juniper. There is a lodge up here and I get out of the heat

into the air-conditioning and treat myself to a strawberry shake.

I find I have to get used to being among people again. One afternoon in the lodge, a man tells me how put out he is that a trail he wanted to hike is closed because Peregrine falcons are nesting there - human presence disturbs them. He doesn't think that's right: "If they can't make it on their own that's just too damn bad." He starts in on the cranes. "All the damn money they spent to save the damn cranes! My mother-in-law says for all that money they could have just stuffed a bunch of them and put one in a museum in every state and I agree with her." I wonder to myself not only how someone like this has chosen to vacation in a national park, but how a species this dumb has managed to dominate the planet. "Guess I'm not much of a conservationist," he says. No shit.

But then another day in the early evening I am sitting and watching the moon rise over the Chisos Mountains. "Wow," I hear a little girl say. "Look, Mom. It's the second full moon in row." Hope returns.

* * *

In *Travels With Charley*, John Steinbeck talks of his dog, Charley, being the perfect icebreaker when he wanted to meet strangers on his trip. He would let Charley go wandering, then go retrieve him, apologizing to people for being bothered by his dog, and so strike up a conversation. For me, the conversation starter is being a woman traveling alone. This simple fact seems to fascinate and confound people. "You're driving around by yourself?" I hear over and over again. "Aren't you scared?" Well, sometimes. But not generally for the reasons they think. My biggest fear is that my ancient van will break down in the middle of nowhere. Of course, as a woman I am cautious and aware of my surroundings. For instance, I don't mind camping where I am the only person and I will stay if there is a family camping nearby, but I will not set up camp if the only other person is a man by himself. Chances are good he is simply a fellow traveler, out to see the country just like me. But why risk it?

Another question I get a lot is, "You do have a gun, right?" I find this question odd, not to mention a little disturbing. Are they concerned about whether I can take

care of myself or are they just trying to find out if I'm armed? I always say, "Yes, of course I do."

What is it that so disturbs people about a woman alone? It cannot simply be concern for our wellbeing; if that were true women would be much safer in the world than they currently are. Are they afraid we lone women are up to something subversive when no one is there to keep an eye on us? I wonder what it is they think we'll do. After all, it isn't women who have caused most of the violence in the world. But the mere fact that I am traveling alone seems to surprise and even shock people. As if the classic road adventure simply doesn't belong in the realm of women. People finding out about my trip will sometimes stare at me for a minute or so, seemingly trying to find a place in their minds to put me. I find it pretty funny that little, quiet me has apparently rocked their worldview so much.

The second most common reaction I get from people is envy. People look at my ancient van, stare down the highway and tell me, "I always wanted to do something like that. Just take off." Why didn't they? A thousand reasons: got a job, had a kid, didn't have the money, just somehow never got around to it. But they still remember the dream. I remember the look of longing they give me on those few

days when I wonder what the hell I'm doing in the middle of nowhere, alone, with no money. It helps me feel right again and sure about what I am doing. I don't want to live with regrets about what I haven't done.

* * *

After I leave Big Bend I head up to Austin. It's been months since I've been in a city and I experience sensory overload. At the grocery store, the abundance of color overwhelms me; everything is so bright and piled high. I am stunned by the amount of stuff available for purchase. While I am conscious of my austere budget, I decide I need to cook all fresh food while I have the chance. I pick up a crimson red bell pepper, some broccoli, some garlic, a small finger of fresh ginger. I find a small package of thinly cut round steak for only a \$1.13. I grab a can of coconut milk and also some fresh eggs for breakfast. At the check-out I ask the young man bagging my groceries, "What are your hours?" His eyes get big. "What are my hours?" he says, looking surprised. "The store's hours," I tell him. The cashier and I crack up. "Ma'am,"

she says, "we're open 24 hours. And don't worry. He doesn't work all that often."

I check into the local hostel and get to work on my fresh stir-fry for dinner. I am so looking forward to this. As in Pilar, I find my cooking once again garners some looks. My fellow road trippers tend to cook pretty simply: peanut butter sandwiches, canned soup, cereal. Unlike in Pilar, however, these people don't think I'm weird. The curious come from other rooms in the house to find out what smells so good.

Austin Hostel Stir-Fry

Thinly slice a small piece of beef, half an onion, a red bell pepper, a carrot, and some broccoli. Mince some garlic and some fresh ginger. Heat a large pan, add some cooking oil, and quickly sauté your ingredients. Add some soy sauce and black pepper. Meanwhile, cook some rice, substituting a can of coconut milk for some of the water. Wait for the scent of this ambrosia to draw fellow travelers to you.

I wander around Austin for a couple days, occasionally going to a happy hour where I can hang out for cheap or strolling through a park. My funds are running quite low and I think I might pick up some work here. I apply for some restaurant work but nothing turns up. It's too expensive for me to stay in a city so I move on to a free campground in the hill country not far from Austin.

Canyon Lake is beautiful and my campsite is right on the lake. I spend my days reading, swimming, fixing dinner. Twice a father and son who like to fish but don't like catfish give me their catch. I dip them in cornmeal and fry them with some potatoes. At night, when everyone else is asleep, I skinny-dip in the lake, water gliding against my skin, floating on my back, my breasts bobbing in the moonlight. I stay the full two week limit.

I read about another free campground in Del Rio, also on a lake, and head down there. But it is disgusting. There are dirty diapers and broken glass all over the lakefront. It is sickeningly humid and the lake looks too yucky to swim in. Whenever I open the door of my van, seemingly hundreds of flies swarm in.

Unfortunately, I've had my mail forwarded here so I am stuck until it arrives. Since I can't cool off in the lake I sit in a little Laundromat reading; it's the only air-conditioned place where I don't have to spend money to hang out. After several days my mail is finally here. I read through my letters quickly, anxious to move on.

I check my wallet. I have eleven dollars. I spend ten dollars on gas and spend my very last dollar on a coconut shave ice. Then I drive to New Orleans to look for work.

* * *

At the end of *Travels With Charley*, John Steinbeck writes: "Who has not known a journey to be over and dead before the traveler returns? The reverse is also true: many a trip continues long after movement in time and space have ceased." This is how I feel about what I will always call "my trip" - a part of it is with me always: the confidence I feel, the memories, the joy of having fulfilled my vision. I still sometimes get that surprised look from people when I tell them of my travels. But now that some

time has passed I'm sometimes surprised myself: "I can't believe I did that," I think. It's not something I think about a lot but when I do it makes me smile.

Remembrance Tea

Boil water and steep almond tea. Peel an orange and lay out the sections on a plate along with some shortbread cookies. Lay out pictures from an important, happy event in your life. Pour the tea into a pretty china cup that you particularly like. Pore over your pictures while eating fruit and cookies. End not by looking back but forward.