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A TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

travels



Sarah A. Williams

College Scholars Project

Pablo, Porsches, and Pinnacles

August 9, 1999

The academic program I developed through College Scholars involved several courses in business, language, history, and cultural studies. My objective was to prepare myself for a variety of disciplines. This project is a creative record of my travel experiences. These overseas opportunities most greatly enhanced my studies and altered my perspectives. I could not have asked for a more ideal program through which to achieve my collegiate goals. Also, I could not imagine a more appropriate conclusion to my academic career with the university.

I have always believed that the true purpose of college was to educate through exposure and experience. My four years at the University of Tennessee were spent searching for greater meanings and truer explanations. Every place I saw, every new face I met, all led to more questioning. Eventually, I realized that all the questions had the same rhythm and most of the lessons had similar meanings. It was the journey that I cherished.

Travelling is the search for oneself, the discovery of oneself, and the reward for being oneself. But every reward is greeted with another deeper, greater question. So the search begins anew. Each day is a journey regardless of where I actually am; that is what college has taught me.

I hope you enjoy the read.

December 5, 1997

Northwest Airlines, Flight 522

Flying is a such a surreal form of travel. Airports are full of commotion and emotion. Mothers are saying goodbye with eyes full of tears. Friends are patting each other pseudo-affectionately. A gentle hug for the girl; a slap on the back if guys. The exchanges between lovers run the gamut from passionate kisses to uncomfortable well wishings. Normally, I have very little time to observe these interactions from my departing airport. The few times I actually made it to the airport in time to check in my luggage, versus frantically sprinting to the terminal with every over-packed bag thrown around me, were proud, momentous occasions. After pleading to be allowed on the plane, I would thrust myself into the only empty seat remaining and let out a heavy sigh of relief. Before I could catch my breath, the plane would be taxing down the runway.

Takeoff is a phenomenon in itself. Exhilaration trickles from my head through my chest and into my toes as the pressure pushes me back into the itchy, polyester seats (I have learned the hard way not to wear shorts on an airplane). Not everyone enjoys the experience. I have been seated next to pray-ers, weepers, finger-crossers, and sleepers. One guy once told me that the only way he could relax was by reading Playboy magazine. I may have been young, but only Shirley Temple is that naïve.

I always choose the window seat. The aisle people are missing one of life's greatest pleasures. I have known this since I was fifteen - the first time I flew. Rising above everything I knew, watching it all become so toy-like, gave me the first sense of true insignificance. I tried to find my school and house, familiar roads and rivers; it looked like the pretend city on Mr. Rodger's Neighborhood. Flying gives a unique perspective

on how trivial our earthly possessions are. Then, suddenly, it all disappears and a thick fog covers the window. Before the excitement of being in a cloud fades, you burst through to see the most beautiful view of the sun just lying on a bed of clouds. It is spiritual. God did not give man the gift of flying just for mobility's sake. It is the gift of seeing the world from a heavenly view.

From age fifteen to twenty, I flew many times, each one special. My first flight overseas I was with fifteen of my closest friends. It was a slumber party in air. The next transatlantic journey was not as pleasant. Mistakenly seated in the smoking section, I met the nudie magazine man. On another trip, I made friends with this kid I had noticed on our arrival flight. It was a long trip. We went on our first dinner date, compliments of United Airlines, fell in love, had our first and last kiss, and broke up all without getting out of our seats except for the occasional bathroom visit.

Being thousands of feet in the air, closer to God than country, gives one a few things to think about. I always carry a journal. I have written anywhere from five pages to a little more than one hundred and five during a flight, depending on the number of layovers. The entries written while travelling to a new place and life are full of apprehension, excitement, and wondering. Long lists of goals and itinerary take up most of the space.

Once on a flight to Washington D.C. a man noticed my intense scribbling and noted that someday I would make an excellent businesswoman. I thanked him and we got into a long conversation about his life, job, and retirement. People tend to share more of

themselves while flying. You are sitting peculiarly close to each other, so talking comes more naturally. I can sense when someone is eager to chat, so I will say something like “I like your sweater,” or “I wonder what’s for lunch.” Before long, I know their entire story. A guy I used to date, who picked me up at the airport several times, laughed at how I always had a new best friend when I left the plane. To me, meeting people is part of the experience.

The return flight is quite different; no list to make or goals to prescribe. These journals are full of memories. From the second I slam into that seat, my pen never leaves the page. Sometimes crying to myself, other times laughing out loud, I relive the entire journey. Anxiety charges through my veins; the thought of forgetting something scares me to death. People probably wonder, “who is that freak, buried in her faux fur covered diary, not eating, not looking up or even going to the pee pods,” as a little neighbor once called the lavatory. I don’t mind looking odd, though. I am building a treasure; this is important work. For whenever I feel hopeless or lost, grabbing one of my travel books is the greatest cure. To be so blessed with fantastical experiences and uniquely learned lessons is rare.

My last flight out of the United States was on December 5th, 1997. I was returning from a semester study in Mexico. I didn’t know when or if I would ever travel again, at least not as a student. The entire week leading up to my departure had been a tribute to life, a celebration of Mexico’s magic. One moment, I would be overwhelmed by immense

gratitude, the next by utter sadness. Finally, the time to say goodbye arrived and it was a tearful event. People were probably wondering who had died.

I actually made it to that flight on time, so I had a few moments to collect myself before the journal writing began. Expecting to weep the whole way home, I was surprised to find myself not sad at all. Instead, memories began flooding my thoughts.

My first travel memory was as a three-year-old. Only bits and pieces of the day exist vividly in my recollection, but my mother has filled in the missing parts. Something had upset me that summer day. I was as angry as a two-foot-tall person could be. There was only one solution: to run away from home. So I packed all my underwear and slippers, a girl's most precious possessions, into my pink suitcase and slammed it shut. Stomping to the top of our seeming mountainous stairs, I announced to the world, really just my mom, that, "I am through with this place forever. I am moving to Mexico." Where the desire to head south of the border came from, I don't know. That was it though, the first day of the rest of my life.

Traveling, the desire to, the plan for, the reality of, was my greatest ambition. It was also a tremendous challenge. No one close to me shared my curiosity for different cultures, their smells and tastes. Our lack of wealth created an even greater obstacle; only heiresses could afford to travel around the world. I had been born in Memphis, Tennessee, eight hours from the mountains, eight hours from the sea. Neither of which I

would see until my teenage years. It was my dream though, and it was going to come true.

The plane had taken off and was cruising above the clouds before I understood why big balls of tears were not streaming down my face. In the last four years I had been to Europe three times and Mexico twice, twelve months in all. Five years before, no one would have believed it possible, except for me. So now I was not sad; I had nothing to be sad about. An incredible sense of pride began filling my heart. It ballooned through my chest, then my legs and arms, and finally it reached my head. Thoughts began racing through my mind. It was not the going to these places that was making me blush so gloriously; it was who I had become because of them.

Lessons are learned in the oddest of places. People discover themselves on street corners, in the supermarket, or while taking a bath. Truth of self sneaks up on you and whenever that moment of purity hits; you just have to stand back and take it in. The clearest picture of my personal reality came to me flying over the mountains of Mexico and the fields of Texas. Filling an entire journal, I retraced the spiritual journey of my travels. These are my most treasured stories; they are who I am.

Summer 1994

Pilsen, Czech Republic

Momrado Dobro Vodo

The twenty of us barged into the train, full of life and laughter. We had just gotten off a plane and had not slept for hours. Even so, we were so excited about the adventure that nothing could contain our enthusiasm. I was wearing a backpack twice my size. I bumped into everyone on the train. It was not until I finally removed the cumbersome luggage that I realized the stares we were receiving. It suddenly became obvious that the train was completely silent; no one was speaking, nor smiling. How strange our group must have seemed: a monstrous ensemble of American teenagers loaded with baggage worth more than most of the travelers' homes on a train bound for rural Czech Republic.

Being foreign was new to most of us. I suddenly sensed how rude we were being. For the remainder of the ride to Pilsen I was consumed by awkwardness. But being out of place makes one much more perceptive. Though we had been studying Czech's history for months, the actuality of communism was not real until we boarded that train. To live oppressed by something greater than yourself had been a benign concept. I had been told that liberty was my gift and independence my tool for prosperity. These people had never received a gift and the only tools they owned were government allocated. The awkwardness would last and it would teach me some of the greatest lessons of my life.

We departed the train with as much clamor and audacity as we had boarded. The locals at the train station greeted us with the same stares and unwelcome glances. After a mile walk that resembled a comic strip parade, we arrived at our destination, Marathona Christian Church. Another aspect of a post-communist society that I had taken lightly

was national atheism. So not only were we obnoxious American kids with expensive luggage; we were Christians.

A small crowd had been gathered to greet us. They were the first welcoming faces we had seen and it gave us great comfort. It was then that I met my surrogate mother Vera. It was obvious that she had not known many good years. Her back was slumped and her ankles thick, but her smile was real. She could not speak a word of English. A crazed self-invented form of sign language would serve as our communication tool for the next week. Not speaking makes for a pure form of friendship. I was utterly dependent upon her good will and she desperately wanted to make me comfortable. It was so simple.

We rode a debilitated streetcar back to her house. After crossing several tracks to get to her stop, we reached home. It was a two-story row house. Actually everyone lived in a two-story row house, all government-built around the same time. Everything was this rusted angry color. Not one house was painted. The trains melted into the streets, which pushed houses out to the sky. At dusk, even the sky matched the town of Pilsen.

The aroma of baking bread quickly erased the rusty city from my memory. Vera smiled and mimed something that I interpreted to mean dinnertime. I was famished. We placed my bags in the hall and headed directly to the table. She motioned for me to sit while she busily prepared things. Soon this delicious collage of meats, cheeses, and warm bread was laid before me. It was my first meal in Europe, and I still remember the smells. We bowed our heads to pray. As Vera mumbled something, I realized how precious prayer

must be to her. For her entire life she had not been allowed to know religion. In a time when she had desperately needed faith, she had been denied it. Prayer had always been an obligatory part of my day, and especially on Sundays. I prayed to conform, to feel that I was like everyone else. Vera prayed for salvation and mercy, not after death, but in life. She thanked God for prayer and the peace to do so. She prayed for the strength to be different. She prayed as I had never seen anyone pray before. Humility, gratitude, forgiveness, and love consumed her, and I could not even understand the words she spoke. The week with Vera taught me faith.

As soon as Vera finished serving me, the door flew open. In walked her 20-year-old son wearing only his briefs. I nearly spit out my chicken. He thought nothing of his semi-pornographic introduction. Vera saw the surprise in my eyes and instructed her scantily clad son to dress for dinner. We resumed eating and were about finished when the door swung open again. This time it was her husband returning home from bowling. He was so excited. I guessed he had bowled well. He gave me a bear hug. I had never realized one could break such a sweat bowling.

It had been a tiresome day and I was experiencing my first case of jet lag, so I signaled to Vera that I was sleepy. So she showed me to my room. It had an enormous feather bed and a window that looked out to the brown city. I wondered if Vera had given up her room for me.

The next morning I was to return to the church alone. Recalling the confusing train-ride the night before, I was incredibly nervous. It took thirty minutes for her to explain that I was to take *tranvial* 7. That morning I prayed for reasons other than obligation and conformity.

Our American group spent the days travelling throughout the hill towns of the Czech Republic. The rides to and from Pilsen were breathtaking. The hills were the freshest green. The occasional cottages were straight out of a children's storybook. We rode on this purple bus with writing all over it. I felt like a member of the Partridge family. We just walked around the towns exploring. The smaller villages seemed to have more color than the rusted Pilsen. We fascinated the children. I had come prepared with stickers and crayons. They had never seen stickers, and I was an instant hit. A few of the days we performed mime shows in the city centers. Apparently miming was a profession of celebrity status. The kids would watch us as if we were performing magic. They surrounded us after every show. It was so strange to hear the Slavic words roll off their tongues. They tried to teach me words. But the only full sentence I ever picked up was, "momrado dobro vodo." It translated "I like good water." I was proud of myself for learning it, and I do like good water.

One child kept repeating something with great emphasis. No one could understand him, but he never stopped trying. He could not figure out why we did not know what he meant. Finally, one day we accidentally ran into him at the pool. He was so happy to see us that he burst into tears. It was then that we all understood that he had been begging for

us to go to the pool. We later learned that his family did not take good care of him and he spent all of his days at the public pool. It was his favorite place, and he wanted to share it with us. I felt so special for being a part of his magical world.

I became very familiar with tranvial 7. I enjoyed the ride, watching the people, becoming anxious to see Vera again. The last full day I was to spend in Pilsen, I stayed at home.

After morning services at church, Vera made us a fabulous meal. Then I rested for hours.

Vera woke me late in the afternoon. She motioned for me to follow her down and out the

back door. An amazing sight greeted my eyes. In a tiny back lot, Vera had created a

garden of wonder. She had every inch planted with fruit trees and vegetable rows. She

and her husband had been sitting there all afternoon. She had made tea and cookies. As

they sat and ate, I wandered all over, picking cherries and eating plums. I had been

wondering all week where the fresh food and jams had come from, and now I knew.

That was my first black cherry. They remain my favorite fruit to this day. In Czech

Republic the average household makes only \$800 dollars a year. As far as I was

concerned, Vera lived like a millionaire. She knew contentment. Something I am still

searching for.

Later that night I ran into her husband. He had crawled out of a storage room to go to the

kitchen. I then realized that Vera indeed had given their room to me for the week. I was

humbled. When I left the next morning, Vera gave me a jar of black cherry jam. We

cried together. For a friendship built without words, it was one of the strongest I had ever

known.

Vera taught me strength and love. Her husband did not believe in church. It grieved her to see him ignore something that had become so important in her life. Yet she continued. Her life had been full of hardships I will never know. I was a kid with tremendous ambition. I thought I knew everything, and if I did not know something I was planning on learning it. Vera taught me that I had more to learn than I possibly could. And that there were many things out there that I did not want to know. Most of all, she taught me that someday I would know suffering, but that I would learn from that too. She gave me a note that someone had taught her to write. In English it said, "Pain is part of the happiness." I have learned that she was right.

Summer 1995

Salamanca, Spain

Birthdays

I was born ten days early. My mother had had a horrible time with my older sister's delivery and never planned on a natural labor with me. On the day of my mother's last check-up the doctor announced that I was ready. They performed the caesarian section the next day. So the twenty-first day of July is special for both Mother and me; she celebrates a pain-free childbirth, and I get to eat as much as I want. My mother has called me her precious gift ever since that day in 1977. Since I did not experience the trauma of natural childbirth, I looked happier than the average newborn. I stayed that way through most of my childhood.

As an infant, I never slept. I did not cry either. I would just lie awake staring in wonderment at everything around me. The first day I discovered my hands, I would not take my eyes off of them. I lay in my crib with my arms extended, turning my wrists to catch every angle of the fascinating new toys.

It was not long before my interest turned from objects to people. I have never been shy. Every person was my play pal, regardless of age, and I quickly understood the importance of timing when it came to entertaining. My first steps were taken without previous practice at my first birthday party. I never tried riding a bike until a family reunion. The entire ensemble was gathered around as I took off, unwavering and without training wheels.

Naturally, I never allowed the annual celebration of my birth to go unnoticed. My mother dubbed July the Birthday Month. From free restaurant dessert all 31 days to

announcements over PA systems at ballgames, I never missed a chance to cash in on the festivities. Once I even went so far as to get lost in a Wal-mart, so they would call for my mother over the loudspeaker, “to claim her child, Sarah, whose birthday is today.” She did not find that so amusing.

During my teenage years, I was always away at camp or on a trip during the *holiday*. It was an exciting way to spend the event; I could capitalize on my mother’s missing me. Once I had a birthday slumber party on April Fool’s Day so I could have all my friends together. For years afterward, people sent me gifts in April and in July.

The summer after high school graduation I lived in Salamanca, Spain. With only a couple of elementary Spanish classes under my cap, the idea of living in Spain was both challenging and frightening. What I most feared was spending July twenty-first alone.

My first few days in Spain affirmed my fears. To be truly lonely for the first time was one of the most gripping feelings. It was as if an entire flock of blackbirds had settled in my heart. They would not move and they scared all the lovely songbirds away. After a few days, comfort began to find its place in the smallest routines. My café ole every morning, afternoon naps, and evening runs shooed away the heavy black birds one at a time. Soon the once foreign smells of drying pork and diesel gas fumes were no longer repulsive. It was an exhilarating sensation when the screams of the morning milkman invoked a crusty, pre-dawn smile. That was when I realized all the loneliness birds were gone and it would be a good day in Spain.

By the time the middle of July rolled around, I began to mention the upcoming event to fellow classmates. There was one person, Jamison, to whom I had grown especially close. He was older and had all of these post-college plans. I was utterly wooed after our first conversation. It did not matter if what he was telling me was true or false. He was different and taught me how to dream BIG. We would sit in the park or in the Plaza Mayor and conjure up future plans of fame and fortune. One minute, I was America's greatest champion of social causes, the next, an actress whose stardom surpassed the Hepburns and Kellys. We created a fantasy world that seemed so real.

Once Jamison caught wind of my upcoming day, he promised to devise a weekend that compared to no other. The twenty-first fell on a Friday that year, which was perfect for a prolonged celebration. Jamison told me to pack a bag for the weekend and plan to leave at noon. I met him at the train station, passport in hand. We hopped aboard a train to Madrid, and Jamison whipped out a packed lunch of cheese, bread, and cherries. We toasted to my perfect day and I whispered a thanks to the anonymous genius that had come up with the idea of birthdays. I was eighteen.

The train dropped us in Madrid well before dinnertime. I figured we would stop first at our hotel, change and then head out for a night on the town. Jamison insisted that there was no time and that we must change at the station. I had bought a white cotton dress for the occasion. It was light and simple; I felt like an angel.

We took a cab into the center of town and found our way to the city's main plaza.

Jamison had heard that there was a Flamenco Dance Festival being held there. Flamenco dancing is an intensely passionate style that has become a national symbol of Spain. The male dancers mix heavy tap steps with forceful arm gestures as their female partners seductively weave around them in an equally impressive manner.

The entire plaza was filled with vacationers and travelling students. We grabbed a free table at one of the outdoor cafes. A stage was positioned in every corner and the dancers performed on the half-hour. While waiting for the next show, I ordered my first aperitif, a *kier avec cassis*. It was delicious, but to a kid freshly turned eighteen, the opportunity alone was sweetest.

When the entertainment took the stage, I was awed. Their movements and loud entrancing music bewitched the entire audience. All four stages clapped, stomped and tapped in unison. It was an impressive display of well-practiced coordination. As they finished their last show, I sat wondering if this was to be the best day in my life. The smell of the air, the excitement of the moment, everyone felt it. If better days were to come, I could not imagine them. At the same time, I prayed that eighteen was not the pinnacle of my existence.

After the plaza, Jamison led me down an alley that had never felt the rubber of tires. At the end was the world's oldest existing restaurant. Opened in 1561, the *Restaurante Botin* is a labyrinth of cluttered rooms and stairwells. There are only five or so tables to

each room so every diner feels like a guest. I believe my love of dining out began that very night.

After our meal, Jamison had another surprise planned. We climbed into a cab that I expected to take us to a club. When Jamison requested the airport as our destination, I nearly fainted. At 10:30 that night we caught a plane to Barcelona. I had dreamed of going to the port city, but it was so far from Salamanca.

That night we danced until dawn aboard this floating club that docked a mile from the shore. *Discotecas* inspire the Travolta in me. As my heart beat with the bass of music, I felt so alive. I certainly was eighteen.

After that night, there were others just as magical. I never bothered comparing one to the other; I just enjoyed them. That night, though, was rare. It was not the constant surprises or the low expectations I had going into it. Jamison was not what made it special. It was the moment that I stopped and wondered if that was it: the best day of my life. At eighteen I thought I knew everything that I needed to know, plus a little for everyone else. The second when I stopped and questioned the truth of my knowledge was when I realized how much I needed to learn. The days filled with magic are wonderful, but true life and the love of it comes from the ordinary. That is a precious lesson to learn on an eighteenth birthday.

Summer 1996

Puebla, Mexico

First Things First

I received the rejection letter from a community service program late in the spring semester of my freshman year. After I got over the shock of being rejected from a program that I was willing to pay to work for, a frantic search for summer plans ensued. Bound and determined to get out of this country, I called hundreds of schools with overseas studies. "Sorry, you've missed the application deadline," was all I heard from them. With all other options exhausted, I checked with Tennessee's Spanish department.

They had a spot in a trip going to Puebla, Mexico. Except for that one time as a three-year-old runaway, I had never been interested in Mexico; the Caribbean, sure, but Mexico, no way. From years of Taco Bell commercials and Cheech and Chong movies, I had developed a very poor conception of our neighboring nation. Somehow fate had its way with me, and come July, I was headed south of the Rio Grande.

Mexico City's airport reminded me of Dante's purgatory. You fly through a layer of fog thicker than mud to discover millions of shacks piled on top of each other. They start at the top of the mountains that surround the Mexico City valley and flow right to the runway's edges. I immediately began to wonder what in the hell I was doing there. I continued to wonder that for quite some time.

Mexico is not a land of apparent treasures. Unlike Europe, poetry-inspiring beauty does not abound. The streets are dirty and loud. The food can make you sick. Dogs are everywhere and carrying who knows what. But if one commits to the hunt, the reward is

tenfold that earned in the lands of bounty. Sometimes wealth is found in the least obvious of places.

The first few days were pretty miserable. My stomach was on fire most of the time, and the altitude made me feel like I was on Benadryl. All the construction workers were attracted to my very leggy, blonde friend who refused to wear any thing but Daisy Duke shorts. They made this snake-like noise that made my skin crawl. The loneliness birds were very stubborn. I figured they had built nests and were hatching eggs.

Finally, I gave up. I could either cry myself to sleep or get over it. So the next day I woke up with a renewed sense of self and a determination to get the most out of this crazy place. The hunt was on.

The family I was assigned to had two children, two parents, and an ugly dog that loved me. (All mutts attach themselves to my side. It is inevitable; if the dog is mangled, missing a leg, or just down right hideous, I am its new best friend.) We lived over a paper and copy store that the father ran. Mexico's streets are lined with such small shops selling one or two rarely useful things or services.

I was an instant member of their family. I fed the fish, helped cook the beans, and even pushed the car when it stalled. It stalled often. But the chores made me feel welcome.

About a week after I arrived, we all piled into the Ford Festiva and went to lunch at the grandparents. The only stereotype American television has correctly portrayed is the insanity of family lunches in Mexico. The house was huge in comparison to most others and it needed to be. As soon as we walked through the door about forty or so relatives came charging at me. Everyone was so excited to meet the visitor. I was terrified.

The children were particularly eager. Their ages ranged from two to sixteen, but the majority were around seven years old. My Mexican mother had five sisters and four brothers. Every brother and sister and their spouses had a child, and some two born in the same year. It was an impressive sight.

The Mexican family lunch lasts for hours; eating at least four courses takes some time. But it was at dinners like these that I learned to love true Mexican food. We ate at grandmother's at least twice a week, sometimes more. Each visit revealed a new family secret. One child had been born out of wedlock, a tragedy in a traditional Catholic home. One sister had eloped; another soap-operatic episode. The family came from very old money and still had many relatives in Spain. (Spanish blood is crucial to the family's social standing.) One sister had actually married a Spaniard. They had met while she was studying in Madrid, had married, and just recently returned to Mexico. He was involved in politics, which frightened the grandmother. One sister had married a rock star who was in a band with his twin brother. Years ago, they were famous, but now he was a plumber with a truly beautiful family. The entire clan was striking: tall, fair

skinned with perfectly manicured style. Most Americans underestimate the handsomeness of the Mexican people.

The greatest secret was not revealed until the last visit to grandmother's. The entire family was throwing me a going-away party. At my first lunch, I had noticed that one of the sisters seemed frail. While everyone was learning the *macrena* she had remained seated. By the last fiesta, she was in a wheelchair and dying. The oldest cousin told me the story.

Her muscles were deteriorating rapidly and there was no cure. She would be gone in a month or so. Every day my mother left the house right after me. I figured she worked, but I was so wrong. She along with her four other healthy sisters would go pick up their dying sibling and take her out for an adventure. Anything she wanted to do, they did it. Her house was filled with new clothes and presents. Every meal was one of her favorites. If her dying was out of their control, they were going to do everything possible to make her last bit of living the best it could be.

When I first discovered the size of this family, I figured that it must have been easy to feel left out of the group. It seemed incomprehensible that a family of ten children could all function and love each other at the same time. But they did. Family was the only thing that mattered in their lives. Strength, love, guidance, helping hands, laughter and everything else came from one place, family.

An eighth grade teacher of mine always used to say, “ya can’t get second things by puttin’em first. Ya can get’em only if ya put first things first.” It never made much sense to me until I met the Cabanas. They all shared the same commitment. The energy and love was all focused in one direction: family. The second things just fell into place.

Sometimes families give their guest small gifts when the student leaves. A poster or cookbook is normal, but the Cabanas gave me so much more. They reminded me of what was first in my life: my precious family.

Summer 1996

Puebla, Mexico

The Street Child

The largest pizza ever made was baked and pieced together in the Plaza Mayor of Puebla. This little Italian immigrant named Mitzo opened up a pizza place in Mexico after he left his hometown of Genoa. I am not sure from where the ambition to bake a world record pizza came, but Mitzo was very proud of his achievement. As far as I was concerned a nine-incher and some of his homemade tequila sangria sufficed. A group of us ate there every day after class. It was an entertaining spot from which to watch the excitement of Mexican commerce and social exchanges take place.

The Mexican plaza houses every form of shop, restaurant, person, and street varmint. Often it smells of whatever festivities took place the night before. A visitor will be amazed by the variety of people wandering through the center, near the fountain. If one sits long enough, the distinguishing differences between Mexicans become obvious. There are the businessmen who hurry through without paying anyone or any item for sale attention. The class system in Mexico is deeply entrenched; the businessmen know they are of the upper echelon and have no need of recognizing the lower classes. The lady shoppers are easy to spot. They are constantly gossiping with their shopping partners and other passing friends. They go from store to store passing the time through talk. The students of the nearby university can be found studying at the outside bar tables. The school kids are more heard than seen. They play games in the fountain and scream out for whatever reason. Most Mexican children are treated like precious treasures. They are the cheerful chorus of the plaza that rises above the screams of the vendors and rumble of traffic. The merchants are a breed of their own. Either they are either pretending to be

busy or have given into the reality that nothing sells and sit watching along with everyone else.

The last group that occupy the watcher's attention are the vagabonds. These people are either homeless or crazy. The crazies entertain the plaza with their street tricks and lively conversations with themselves. One day I was sitting, watching everyone, enjoying my pizza, when I spotted a most interesting man. He was well past middle age and dressed from head to toe in worn soccer garb. He was greeting everyone he passed and was heading straight for my table. About the same time, my blonde headed friend joined me. As soon as this Pele-wanna-be spotted her golden locks and long legs he sprinted towards us screaming, "American girls, I love American girls." We almost ran for Mitzo's help but the loony caught us before we could get up. "U.S.A., rock-n-roll," he continued, "I want to be American. Marry me blondie. We have blondie baby and I show my stuff." We assumed he meant soccer moves. He continued for a while until Mitzo came to rescue us. True to vagabond form, this crazy was quite entertaining.

Unfortunately the homeless are not as spirited. The women are taught at a very young age to crouch in the street corners and beg. They have babies only to use them as collateral. No males are by their side. These women beg to support their husbands' drinking habits. The children in the beggar-mother's arms eventually grow too big to be carried. These children can break your heart. The mother is too weak to get up, so she sends her children to charm the pennies out of people. They walk the plaza all day, making friends with the gullible only to steal from their plates and pockets.

Our group of six Americans and one German was approached frequently. These street kids were good at what they did and could recognize a handsome group of sitting ducks from miles away. One boy named Pablo was particularly charming. He had befriended American students before and knew we were cash cows, but he also needed more than money. Pablo was a lot like the other street beggars. His father was a drunk and his mother a crumbled heap of blankets and babies. He had more siblings than he could keep up with and his only friend was himself. Any money he could scrounge, he had to keep hidden from his father. He picked up half used cigarettes from the floor and finished them off. He ate other people's table scraps and was despised by the merchants. Pablo was five.

The first time we met Pablo he laid it on thick. He staggered up to our table with the most pathetic frown. It was as if he had gone to the Sally Struther's school on how to look pitiful for money. Then he laid his chin on the top of my arm chair rest. He barely reached that high. Pablo was an adorable boy. He had the typical straight black school boy hair, but his eyes were rounder than silver dollars. He used those eyes as his bargaining tool. I'll admit that with one glance I was hooked. "Do you have any change?" he pleaded in his elementary Spanish. The request released sighs of pity from everyone at the table. Apparently, all of my susceptible pals had taken the bait. We pulled up a chair and ordered Pablo a pizza. An instant partnership was forged. We supplied food and Pablo afforded us the feeling that we were helping.

Over the next few weeks we played with Pablo daily. Eventually we met one of his many sisters, Maria. She had the same routine as Pablo and identical eyes. She too became our pizza pal. We were even introduced to Pablo's mother. She sat at the same corner everyday. I had seen her many times, but her identity was a mystery to me. Now that I knew her, I felt guilty for not handing her the spare change she had been requesting.

Pablo became very close with our group. He greeted us at the school door every day, precisely when classes let out. We would walk through the city and he would introduce us to all the bums. The other Mexicans thought we were crazy for allowing him to tag along with us, but it was too late. We were enchanted with Pablo. He would teach us songs and dances. He never seemed upset by the hand that he had been dealt. Of course, he was only a child and did not know to be angry or sad. It was perhaps this innocence that allowed Pablo to teach me so many lessons.

One day after class, Pablo was not standing in his usual spot. So a few of us went looking for him. His mother had no clue where he was, not that that was unusual. We searched for hours until finally we found his sister holding a screaming kitten. Maria seemed very sad. She also was looking for her brother. Earlier that day they had found two stray kittens and wanted to keep them. They spent the entire morning playing with them and building them a house. After long planning they concocted a scheme to convince their father to let them keep them. Certain that they could take care of them, they approached their already intoxicated father. He became so furious at the notion that he beat to death one of the kittens, while the other ran away. Maria told us that that was

when Pablo ran crying. She chased after the second kitten and found it in the churchyard. She had been carrying it all day. She knew she could not keep it, but she did not know what to do with it. We comforted her as much as possible with our basic Spanish. Eventually we had to leave to go back to our evening classes. As we walked away, we heard the kitten's cries grow louder. It was the strangest sound I had ever heard a cat make. When we looked back, Maria was running away and the kitten was locked behind the church gate. The kitten was all alone, crying for being lost, for losing its new friend, and for the death of its brother. I cried.

The last week we were in Puebla, we decided to pool together enough money to buy Pablo something. Mexico being as cheap as it is, we all had money to spare. We collected about seventy bucks; a fortune in Pablo's world. We had heard Pablo talk about wanting a bike, so that is what we decided to buy him. The bike was bright red and fast. When we wheeled it out of the classroom on our last day, Pablo could not believe his eyes. He rode alongside us all day. We showed everyone in the town his new set of wheels. When we finally found Maria, she was so happy for him. I had not seen her smile since she lost her kitten. As Maria was riding we noticed that Pablo looked upset. I asked him what was the matter. He shook his head meaning nothing, but something was wrong. After enough prodding he confessed. He did not think it was fair for Maria not to have a bike, too. We had not even thought about Maria.

We left the next day. Pablo came to say goodbye. He was crying uncontrollably. The next group of students would replace us, but Pablo had changed me forever. He was the

strongest five-year-old I had ever met. A friend of ours stayed behind to travel. He ran into Pablo on his way back through Puebla and noticed that he did not have his bike with him. Pablo immediately started to cry and confessed that his father had heard about the bike. He forced Pablo to sell it for five drinking dollars. Pablo knew suffering. Whenever I am sad I think of Pablo and how he could find happiness in the smallest things. Then I open my eyes wide and smile through the hurt.

Summer 1997

Caen, France

The Veteran

When I was a small child and living at my grandparents', I would sneak into the attic and play around. The fascination with the attic came from the C.S. Lewis book, The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, so naturally my greatest curiosity concerned the hanging clothes hidden in the corner. Certain that a world of mystery and magic was behind the row of clothes, I was disappointed when I met only an insulated wall. As the years passed, I became intrigued not with what was behind the clothes, but the stories buried within them.

My grandmother is the queen of pack rats. I guess she has kept everything so she would not forget anything. I have always admired the great lengths she has gone to in order to keep up with everyone's memories. Originally, it was my aunt's cheerleading uniform that caught my attention, but the stories of my homecoming queen aunt were not exactly spellbinding. So, I quickly moved on to the second garment, my mother's wedding gown.

Even in my childhood, her gown had already begun to yellow. I suppose that was fitting. A gown should not outlast a marriage. It was a beautiful piece. My mother bought it on sale for three hundred dollars. It had short sleeves, which was risqué for the time. I was not allowed to remove the gown from its hanging bag, so my interest in it also passed.

After a few more of my grandmother's random salvages, I discovered a heavily medaled olive green wool jacket. It looked like a coat wrapped in Christmas paper and I was amazed. I wondered who deserved such a garment. It seemed fit for royalty. I was not

tall enough to remove the hero's cloak from its hanger, so I just inspected it from afar. That was the day that I first became aware of war.

My grandfather was a navigator in World War II. He flew his thirty missions with the highest regard for our country and his God. He was given the chance to retire from duty after his last required flight, but he chose to fly once more over the beaches of Normandy, on D-Day. My grandmother had joined the Women's Auxiliary Corps to be a part of the effort, but her mother thought it unfitting and forced her to return home. She wrote and prayed for my grandfather every hour of every day. When he returned she, along with her nation, was very proud of him.

It would be years before I heard my grandfather tell the stories of his war experience. My grandfather is a humble man and the war was too painful to share. He lost his youth, many friends, and most of his hair. At my grandparent's fiftieth wedding anniversary party an enlarged black-and-white photo taken at their wedding was mounted by the gifts. In the picture, my young grandfather had this unfamiliar smile on his face. It was the look of innocence, anticipation, and pride. He had a new bride. He was about to embark on an adventure of greatness. My grandmother told me that night that she had not seen him smile that smile since. The war had taken it away from him.

I have always had the greatest admiration for my grandfather. He has the strongest will of character that I have ever known a man to possess. Being his granddaughter, I was

blind to knowing him as a real man, until a total stranger made clear to me who my grandfather is.

It was June 6, 1997, and I had been given the incredible opportunity to be in Normandy during the memorialization and remembrance of what history calls D-Day. On a bluff overlooking the English Channel sits a cemetery. The thousands of American servicemen who lost their lives during the Normandy Invasion are buried there. An intricate arrangement of white granite gravestones lines the land. The markers are shaped in the form of either a cross or Star of David. The sight is a glorious one. I was immediately awe stricken. The service commemorating the first day of the invasion included participants from every country involved, even Germans. There were men from all of the American service divisions. Flags were raised and diplomats spoke. I had been studying the invasion for months and the moment was a surreal one. There was such a peace in the air. The calm was overwhelming. I cannot imagine what that day was like for those men. I suppose the serenity on that bluff that day was the greatest tribute a collection of people could give to those buried there.

After the ceremony I made my way through the park and past the graves. A chapel large enough for a handful of worshipers lies in the middle of the cemetery. It is a glorious structure with a mural commemorating the effort on its domed ceiling. I stopped to pray, but I could not think of words deserving of the men I was honoring. So I said a few words of gratitude, thankfulness for the life I have led and the people that have sacrificed so much for me to have it.

The visitors to the beach that day formed a community. We were all very aware of our reasons for being there. Many had the deepest need to share their stories and others wanted only to be alone. As I left the cemetery and headed for the beach, I was careful not to bother anyone.

The walk to the shore is a difficult one. The wall dropping to the sea is steep. Once I reached the bottom, I walked as far into the ocean as I could to get an idea of how frightening that day must have been. Iron barricades still rest in the shallow waters. They offer a stark contrast to the white waves rolling onto the now clean sands. I kept asking myself what I would have done if I had been in that water 53 years before. Would I have been the strong one, or would I have hidden? Hopefully I will never have to know, but it is important to ask oneself and test one's conscience.

As I strolled along the beach listening to the sounds of the ocean and the mumbles of the visitors, one voice caught my attention. A man behind me was talking about his experience to some of the other veterans. What distinguished him from the other men was the comforting sound of Delta talk. I knew he had to be not only from the South, but also from either Mississippi or the Memphis area of Tennessee. After a little self-convincing, I approached him. I asked him if I had correctly judged his origin, and I had. He was not only from Tennessee, but also from Millington, my grandfather's hometown. I was amazed by the coincidence and we exchanged small world sentiments.

We talked for a while about me and my mother. Then he turned the conversation to my grandparents. My grandmother is a kind woman. He complimented what a good person she was. Then he began to talk about Jim, my granddad. He told me that Jim Wright was the most respected man in town. He was honest, hard working, and most of all brave. My granddaddy was a hero to this man. All the medals that had caught my attention those many years ago were there for a reason. After I said my good-byes to the sweet sounding veteran, I walked back into the water and looked again at the beach. I may not have known whether or not I had true courage, but I knew my granddad did. For the first time in my life, I felt like I knew my grandfather, thanks to a stranger on a beach thousands of miles away. I was honored.

Summer 1997

Bonn, Germany

Helen of Samara

Climbing out of the dark train station, I found the rudeness of daylight startling. I had been travelling for an entire night and part of the next day. It is always odd to be in motion for so long and then have it come to an end. It is like roller-skating; after hours of moving on wheels, one has to learn to walk again. After hours in a train, surrounded by strangers, one has to learn to stand still again. I arrived in Bonn, Germany, on a late July afternoon. Living in France had been like playing on skates. Germany felt awkward, and I could feel my legs fumbling.

I made my way to the student center where I was staying. Loneliness had entered my thoughts for the first time. It was oddly comforting. Somehow loneliness always reveals great truths. Whenever it begins to place its weight on my heart, I know that my life will soon be changed.

After checking in, I threw my backpack on my shoulders for the last time that day and looked forward to sleeping. The corridor to my room was so dim it made finding room 204 difficult, but once I was inside, the same sun stung my eyes. Germany was already becoming a place of stark contrasts. I collapsed on the bed.

Two hours later, the unlocking of the door woke me. Then I heard for the first time a true Russian accent. Helen told me she was from Samara, a city in central Russian next to a river that is six miles wide. She always introduced herself that same way.

I am embarrassed to admit my first impression was a prejudiced one. I had been studying World War II while in France. It was as if I had been misplaced for three weeks, transcending time and living in history. With the post-war cultural impressions cemented in my mind, I was already leery of Germany. Then to be assigned a Russian roommate propelled my apprehensions full-force.

Helen's smile quickly eased my worries. As she unpacked her things she and I talked about our travels. The flight from Moscow had been crowded and smoky. I could see the fatigue in her eyes. Sudden excitement interrupted our conversation when she reached the bottom of her bag. Her mother had sneaked a stack of photographs into her things and Helen was thrilled. "My mother knows how photos make me less sick of home," she shared.

The first picture was of the infamous river. She was telling the truth. It was wide as a sea and the deepest blue. Being from Memphis, I doubted that a river could ever be any color except Mississippi Mud. She surprised me with the next wrinkled Polaroid. It was an ensemble of fairly dressed people and she was standing in the center dressed in white. Helen was twenty-four and married. She had been for quite some time. Her husband was a professor and she had met him in class.

After flipping through the rest of her stack I knew more about Helen than I would ever have expected. She was incredibly honest and eager to share her history. Apparently, telling stories is a national pastime in Russia. Helen was a graduate student at her local

university, studying Eastern European Art and Literature. She really did not understand why she had been chosen for this program. We were in Bonn for the Trans-Atlantic Summer Academy studying the deepening and widening of European political structures. We would spend fourteen-hour days going from one seminar about politics to another on economics. Helen did not mind that she was completely uninterested in the topic. It was a free trip to Germany, and she was not planning on attending many of the seminars anyway. She had a personal itinerary scribbled on a piece of paper. By the time she left she would see every museum, garden and gallery in the city. I was impressed with her boldness.

Apparently, evading the true intentions of an academic program was not a new game to Helen. She had lived in Geneva, officially studying the United Nations. Somehow she had never enrolled in a single government course or even entered the UN buildings. Instead she took an entire semester of art history and French. The past year she had lived in Warsaw. She could not recall what her donors had intended for her to study, but whatever it was, she had avoided it.

Ever since the end of communism, European Universities have encouraged Russian students to enroll in their programs. Helen rarely paid for any expense involved. She spoke several languages and knew every corner of most large cities. I assumed she was studying for some eventual position of great importance. When I asked, her reply shocked me; she was going to be a housewife. Why the degrees, the travel, and the time away from the family she loved so much I asked. Helen then introduced me to Russia.

Russia had changed so much that it was difficult for her to stay home. Before democracy, life was simple. The family was at the center of every Russian's heart. "Everyone thinks that it was always dark in Russia," she explained, "but there was sun, there was life and laughter. It was not a black hole. Russia was not evil. Moscow was very far away. We did not even think about Communism." I had been so wrong. She talked about her childhood and how happy it had been. She had studied ballet for ten years. All her lessons had been free and so were her supplies. Her father worked, but not hard. Everyday was about family: eating together, sharing stories, and raising children. No one knew any different and no one cared.

Since Gorbachev had begun speaking about perestroika, every aspect of Russian life had changed. Before, there had been only two television channels: one for news and the other for arts and culture. Now American programs were the most popular. Helen was frightened by the influence they had on her fellow Russians. The wealth of the Western world is not possible for an economy as simple as Russia's, but everyone envied the riches of America. Crime, poverty, and homelessness had never been issues. People had not even had locks on their doors. Today, Helen does not even speak to neighbors that used to bake her cookies.

What saddened Helen most of all was the state of education in Russia. A developed mind was the greatest treasure a person could possess. Education produced joy of conversation and personal achievement. Now, the universities were in disarray and professors rarely

got paid. Her husband worked three jobs. She traveled, because it allowed her to live for free. She would stop only when it was time to become a mother.

When she had first walked into the room, I assumed the worst of her. I figured she was something so foreign to my world that we would hardly exchange words. In half an hour, Helen had changed my view completely. I was so ashamed of myself. It was one of the most humbling moments of my life. Helen had had her entire life disrupted by a force much larger than herself, yet she clung to what she knew was precious.

On our wall she hung a sign that read in Russian, "Gratitude and simplicity deliver the greatest joy." All my life I had searched for abundance. I believed I could find it through the literal meaning of the word. As we Americans say, "the more the merrier." The spiritual meaning of abundance is where true happiness is found. Helen was so grateful for what she possessed: her family and her mind. It was simple.

At the end of our month together, Helen had taught me many other things. She had also seen every museum, garden, gallery, and very little of our classroom. When I find that I am feeling sorry for myself because something superficial is missing from my life, I think of Helen and her sign. I am grateful for the simple fact that I met her.

Summer 1997

Bonn, Germany

Absolutely

Germany is covered in bike paths. They even have bike stop lights and miniature stop signs. In theory, it is a fabulous idea, but in practice it is a fatal form of transportation. Actually, the Germans are quite skilled at maneuvering themselves in and around precarious objects, like unwitting American tourists. Somehow, I managed to continually place my pedestrian self in harm's way. At first I was flattered by all the presumably flirtatious bike honks. After the first of many accidents, I recognized the true intention of all that attention.

The University of Bonn was built along the Rhine. The most direct route from home to school was the river-walk, a pathway thick with blossoming bushes, trees and bikers. The walk to school was so magnificent that I persevered and suffered only a few injuries.

I was involved in an intensely structured program with the most rigid collection of young people. There were students from every country in Europe and also the United States. Thinking this would be incredible exposure to cultures, I had looked forward to Bonn for months. The program scheduled classes from seven in the morning till six at night, and we would visit embassies or outside lectures almost every night. The pace was exhausting. The first week I was thrilled by the lessons and inspired by the brilliance of my peers. By the second week, I was ready to collapse. The group quickly began to divide between those who were still interested and those who skipped class.

Skipping my first class was not relaxing. I felt no release or freedom. I was overwhelmed with guilt. The lectures were fascinating, the people stimulating, but I was

still bored. Guilt soon turned to identity crisis. Ever since high school, I had wanted to be involved in government, law, and possibly foreign service. That was my precious long-term plan; it was a part of the life map. Now, after one week, I was completely and totally sick of it.

For the next week I continued to conform with the academic clique, while the skippers were off at long lunches in the city square. On Friday, not listening to the lecturer, I occupied my time by making another time line for my life. Junior year I'll do this. Senior year I'll do that. Somehow this monotonous routine was interesting. Then I looked at the list and no longer felt the same satisfaction that it had always given me. Thumbing through my notebook, I found at least two dozen identical lists staring me in the face. Almost unconsciously, I had performed this same life organization ritual two or three times a day. My identity crisis went into full swing.

For the first time, I took an honest look at my list. Was this really who I was? Did I want to do these things or just want them on my list? I was sitting in a room surrounded by verifiable geniuses. They wanted to be there and should have been. I on the other hand, had already given up, and was planning my next move.

I skipped the next class and felt no remorse for doing it. The debate over whether to deepen or widen European political institutions would continue without me. It had been all week.

I walked to the river and sat in a garden. Sometimes not thinking at all, clearing the head, is the only solution. After a while, I was ready to face myself again. The journal I was using had famous quotes at the page tops. "We must have the courage to allow a little disorder in our lives," was printed in bold, purple letters. The tiniest coincidences are sometimes the greatest miracles; those words started a long journey of self-discovery.

As a child, learning even the smallest bits of information felt like such an achievement. As I grew older, the lessons grew harder and the achievements grander. Soon smiley faces for good spelling turned into honor rolls, blue ribbons, national awards, and scholarships. Learning became secondary to the reward. Knowledge was useless unless I was acknowledged for receiving it.

Germany was just another check on the list, but I didn't deserve it. Even worse, I didn't want it. So I made a different list. Over one hundred things I could not wait to know ran out of my head and onto the page. It was thrilling. As a child I would drive my mother mad with my questions. Why is the dog so hairy? Why do we eat peas at dinner and eggs for breakfast? Every part of the day was interesting. I loved learning.

Genius, I am not; I have never claimed nor wanted to be. But giving up on the process of learning for pleasure's sake is a tragedy. That is when a person forgets who she is or what she hopes to be. Then a person is living in a world of 'supposed to's' and 'just because.' For a child that used to ask why about every five seconds, I was far from

being the real me and even further from being happy. That day with my new list in hand, I began the search.

The rest of my trip was spent going to the classes I thought interesting. Otherwise, I was found pursuing the disorder of life and asking why a lot. From touring art museums to taking a Rhine wine class, I learned amazing things that summer. I even rented a bike.

The day before leaving, my closest friend, Barbara, and I went on a daylong ride.

Barbara was from some small town in Northern Italy. She had applied for the program mistakenly and spoke only mediocre English. But what she could say she said well. Her accent highlighted the honesty of her words. “Ab-so-lutely” was one of her favorite exclamations. Imagine this tiny Italian woman with melon-size blue eyes screaming out ab-so-lutely with the pauses and emphasis just perfect; it was too charming. As we were riding along the Rhine that final time, no longer made paranoid by the German speed demons, Barbara started laughing out loud. Barbara’s giggles were always followed by some hilarious remark. I asked her what was so funny and she replied, “Nothing, I am just so, so happy! Ab-so-lutely Happy!” She was right.

Summer 1997

Somewhere between Germany and Switzerland

The Odd Couple

Travelling alone has always seemed romantic. The only problem with travelling alone is that you are alone. Making plans and moving around is much easier, but some days the advantages of convenience are outweighed by the loneliness.

I had been through Germany, Switzerland, and Italy companionless. After one too many single tables, it caught up with me. I had filled up two entire journals. The pen and paper had become my closest friends. I had met people throughout my journey, but everyone was always heading in a different direction. Tired and frustrated, I could not imagine starting at the beginning of another book. So skipping the bookstore, I headed for the closest pub.

From the past few weeks, I had learned that where there was food and drink, there were friends to be made. I do not even remember the name of the place. I did not write it down. Avoiding my two pals, I had thrown them into a deep pocket in my pack. To be honest, I cannot remember if I was in Germany or Switzerland. It is a good thing I made such an exhaustive effort to record so much of my journey; otherwise my memory would have lost it.

As soon as I walked through the threshold of the dimly lit, mahogany-paneled den, I felt more comfortable. The familiar mumble of conversation filled the room and I felt somehow included. I settled in the corner so I could watch the activity without being noticed. I ordered a salad and beer. My favorite things about Germany were its breakfasts, salads and beer.

Every morning my hotel, whichever one, would lay out the most heavenly collection of heavy breads, granola, honey, cheese, and jam. Making combinations with all that was available was most entertaining. Cheese and cherry jam was my favorite. After such breakfasts, I could normally eat just a salad. Luckily, the Germans could make a good one. The perfect combination of fresh vegetables with seasoned oils and vinegar is a difficult task. Every country had its own special recipe and I appreciated them all.

Oddly, it took the heavy lagers made famous by the Germans to acquire a love of beer. College kegs had not been tempting, but the German variety of colors, flavors, and stoutness was intriguing. Finishing a drink that left a inch thick ring of cream at the top somehow felt like an accomplishment.

So with my perfectly dressed salad and loaded refreshment, the task of losing loneliness began. About the time there was a substantial gap between the top of the beer mug and its contents one of the oddest couples rambled into the bar. Actually, they were heard approaching the door, but no one figured the husband and wife team would enter. The well-past-middle-aged man was pushing his equally matured wife who was in a wheelchair. By their side was the most handsome member of the group, their golden retriever. It soon became obvious from the husband's highly audible tone that he was nearly deaf. They immediately caught my undivided attention, along with every other person in the bar.

As they settled into the largest booth in the house, I began to notice their other rarities. The wife wore layers of makeup in a style that probably had not been altered since the early seventies. Her sweater was bright purple and rather revealing. A thin pair of black stretch pants was met by two silver pumps to conclude her ensemble.

Once his wife was settled, the ringleader of the troupe removed his black leather jacket, revealing a scant tank top and a series of tattoos, aged and obviously attained in intervals. He had hair on his shoulders and neck. He and his wife were quite a sight. The golden well-mannered dog was by far the least obvious of the crew.

For the next twenty or so minutes they were the main attraction. As the wife screamed in some Slavic dialect, the husband listened attentively, interrupting occasionally with a boisterous laugh. I imagined that she was describing the place and hoped that I was not one of the humorous topics that invoked his uproarious replies. Everyone else could understand their conversation, and were making every attempt to ignore it, but I was glued to their words. Somehow not being able to understand something makes it all the more interesting.

After finishing my beer, I was not ready to leave. I motioned for the waiter to bring another. The couple saw my gesture and called the waiter to them first. I did not think anything of it until the waiter and the fuzzy man began looking in my direction. My body froze. Were they angry that I had been staring at them? Flashing through the past half-

hour, I could not remember doing anything blatant or rude. My anxiety grew as the waiter approached my, what I thought was hidden, table.

“The two in the corner want you to sit with them,” he bluntly stated in an authoritarian German voice. From his tone, I felt I was not given a choice. Then I remembered why I was there. Maybe this was an answer to my loneliness. So I did as the waiter commanded.

The man was standing by the time I reached the table. In decent English he said, “you American, yes?” “Yes, sir,” I replied loudly. “Welcome, we love Americans.” I was thinking how often I received that comment and wondering why people chose me to express their appreciation, when my thoughts were interrupted by a beer thrust into my palm. “I am E. and this is V.,” he introduced. I returned the introduction and the conversation was off. After about a beer of where-are-you-from, what-do-you-do’s, I forgot about the rest of the people in the pub and began to enjoy my new found friends.

The two had been married only ten years. They were both on their third marriage, each widowed and then divorced. The wife was wheelchair-bound because of a motorcycle accident a few years back. She did not mind, though. Life had been good to her and it was time for her to slow down anyway. The husband’s deafness was due to an illness he described in German, so I had no clue what it was. He was determined to keep talking though; the rest of the world would just have to speak up.

I do not know if it was the third drink or just their normal inquisitive manner, but the questions soon turned in my direction. They wondered why I was alone and looking sad. The husband quickly flirted, “why such a beautiful girl not have a boyfriend?” The wife chuckled at his silly attempt. I told them about my summer and having a few weeks to spend on my own. After my admitting that I was tired of the solitude, the wife had advice to offer. Her sentence structure was jumbled, but the meaning was clear. Youth was a precious gift not to be spoiled. These were the days to ride motorbikes and play in water fountains, not weep over the small stuff. Everyday is a good day if one thinks it is.

Then she stopped for a minute and thought to herself. E. started to ramble about something else when she came out of her trance. She interrupted him to clarify her advice. What she was saying was true, but she had not realized it while she was young. The revelation came after a funeral, a divorce, and a motorcycle accident. The knowledge of how precious is life came with age, but most of all, through love. Unselfish love, the kind that could only exist between two rare creatures such as E and V. Her life depended on his and it was the same for him.

The oddest pair of people I met while in Europe that summer gave me the greatest hope. To be honest, I had never thought about a love like that. I was absorbed in my life, the everydayness of it. I had assumed love would come; it was part of the formula. But love is not a part of any calculated plan, dated and expected. Love is what gets one through the day. It is where happiness hides. Not that it has to be shared only with one other person; if one is capable of loving, then all things become more special. I had forgotten

that somehow. E.and V. shared their love with me, and the weight of my loneliness was lifted. Whenever I lose life's direction, I think of them. It reminds me that whatever I am going through is just a funeral, divorce, or motorbike accident that is leading me towards a greater understanding of love.

Summer 1997

San Sebastian, Spain

Two Hills, A Bay, and A Gigantic Jesus

Tests of courage come in the strangest packages. I rented a car to drive from Madrid to San Sebastian thinking it would be faster. Little did I realize that I would face death about two dozen times along the way. When I finally arrived in the northern Iberian beach town, I quickly parked my car and swore not to move it until absolutely necessary.

San Sebastian is known as the jewel of the Basque region. A look at the bay, and it's easy to understand why. Where the last of the lush green Pyrennes fall into the sea, some genius thought to build a town of white grand hotels and fine restaurants. The thin shoreline runs around the small bay to meet hills on both ends, before being devoured by the Atlantic. There is a glorious harbor to the left filled with yachts and sailing vessels. The most striking feature of the heavenly scene is a statue of Jesus at the top of the right hill overlooking the sea. It catches your attention immediately, invoking humility and peace. It is quite a climb to the summit, but after the harrowing car ride I felt bold enough for just about any adventure.

After strolling along the boardwalk that follows the beach, I checked into the hotel. It was a small hostel that offered a free breakfast, which they delivered to each room at eight sharp. At first I was upset by the thought of being awakened so early, but once the tray of buttered sweet rolls and gourmet coffee was set before me, I had no complaints.

The only purpose for the day was a tan. I was one of the first to set up camp that morning, so I had a prime spot. It was cool that morning. The pleasant sea breeze quickly eased me to sleep. When I woke up the beach was packed, mostly with

Spaniards. Some young, most not, the bathers had no preoccupation with personal space; we were lined up like sardines. Something peculiar about my neighbor caught my attention. It was a she and was not wearing a top. She was not the only one. Most women from age two to seventy-two had their breasts comfortably exposed. This was my first topless beach experience. After the initial shock and the pink drained from my cheeks, I noticed how normal it seemed. Everyone was so at ease. The men were mostly in bikini suits and enjoying it. There we were, all in panties, only inches from each other, with Jesus staring at us from his perch.

So I figured if Jesus was okay with it, I should join them. Slinking out of my top like a snake shedding its skin. Inch by inch, it was painful. Then there I was, half-naked. I looked around to see if anyone was noticing the imperfections that I knew so well. Not a single glance in my direction. Instant exhilaration. "I am woman; hear my roar...," began playing in my head. I felt bold and free.

Ever since puberty I had been ashamed of my body. Daily jogs and plain turkey sandwiches were such a part of my life. I hated full-length mirrors and swimsuits. In one moment the stupidity of it all became so clear. The sags and fat rolls of very confident women surrounded me. They were beautiful and so was I. It was a great revelation. I was released from the bondage of physical perfection. That night I feasted.

The next morning I was ready to tackle that hill and come face to face with a very tall Son of God. Filled with a new sense of spirit, I ran like never before. Each sprinting leap

was empowering. Strong and alive, I bounded up the hundreds of steps leading to the top. Suddenly, I was there. It was just after dawn, so I was alone. The sun had come over the mountains and was shining on Jesus' face. The bleached buildings below were sparkling. It was a dazzling view. A sense of awe that I had ignored for years filled my body. I began to pray.

College had done strange things to my religious faith. During my last year of high school I had begun to question the meanings of many beliefs. My church was a supportive and nurturing environment. It provided the stability I needed during the difficult teenage years. My friends were there and the church organized fun events for us. I tried not to take it much further than that for fear of doubting. My life was perfect, no questions asked.

Then one Sunday, the minister began talking about giving your life over to Christ. It scared the hell out of me. I was just a kid. My entire destiny was yet to unfold; how could I give up control just when things were getting good? Anyway, a lot of the Christian doctrines I had been told to believe did not make any sense. I wondered about damnation. It seemed hoaky and snobbish not to include everyone in the afterlife.

Most of my senior year I traveled to colleges and scholarship seminars. For the first time, my accent drew attention. People asked me about orange soda and fried chicken. Such diversity of lifestyles made me question my own, realizing for the first time that

Christianity was not the only religion. So how, with a whole life ahead of me, could I exchange it all for something as vague as faith?

I never attended a single church service while away at college. It was not convenient and way too early. So I suffered through many challenges and stages independently. The choices, whether good or bad, were mine to claim. The outcomes were mine to handle. The decision to refuse Christ happened one April day in 1995. I was hiking with some friends. We stopped and rested at the top of a waterfall. When everyone was ready to go, I asked to stay behind. I sat there for hours. Why was the choice all or nothing? It seemed unfair. In the end, I chose me. It was one of the most frightening days of my life.

So now here I was, on top of a hill, barely past six in the morning, covered in sweat, and praying for the first time in years. I am still not sure what led me to that moment. Traveling alone gives one so much time to think. My journals were full of stories from each day, but also questions about the past and myself. Regardless of accomplishment or failure, I had been feeling empty. I had everything a person could ask for, and honestly did not want anything else. There was just this hollowness that I carried around with me. Avoiding it was easy when I was surrounded by friends or lists of things to do, but when I found myself isolated from family and familiar surroundings, the emptiness was so loud.

Suddenly, I was so tired of myself. Remembering that day by the waterfall, I realized how stubborn I had been. Refusing God had been my way of proclaiming independence. The idea of faith had meant nothing to me, because I thought I knew everything. Now, after years of amazing and difficult experiences, truth came crashing in on me. I knew nothing. Sure, one plus one is two, but besides that I was completely confused.

I sat on that hill until noon asking all the questions I had been suppressing. The answers did not come instantly, but relinquishing the responsibility to something so much greater than myself delivered the most unbelievable peace.

Living is a continuous struggle. It is so easy to avoid the harsh realities, to not ask the hard questions. Sometimes, though, the asking is thrown in your face. A 200 hundred foot Jesus with the sun in his eyes caught my attention.

Fall 1997

Guadalajara, Mexico

Mexican Royalty

As I stood at the door, I could hear the barking of two obviously obnoxious poodles. Behind the serenade of yelps was the voice of an irritated housekeeper. Before the door swung open, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. Little did I know, I was about to embark on one of my wildest journeys yet.

Earlier that day, my friend Andrea had introduced me to a group of guys that she had met by coincidence. Andrea was from London but had attended boarding school in Vancouver. It was at her high school that she had met Alejandro, a tall, handsome Latino from Guadalajara, Mexico. Years later Andrea was skiing in Utah and met another ensemble of good-looking boys from the land of tequila and mariachi bands. Ironically, her skiing companions were close friends with Alejandro, otherwise known as Big Al. So when Andrea arrived in Mexico to study for a semester she gave them a ring and planned a lunch meeting.

To be a member of the Mexican upper crust, owning a beach house is mandatory. The entire clan we lunched with were going to their places that weekend and invited us along. The parents and true owners of the coastal palaces would also be there, so Andrea and I figured it would be safe.

The group consisted of five guys. Big Al was the Vancouver friend. Alfonso was one of the boys Andrea met at the ski resort. He was shy and obsessed with sailing, so much so that he referred to his sailing guidebook as the bible. Carlos was suave and confident. He was interested in politics and making money. They mentioned another guy that

would be joining us, Javier, but he could not make lunch. The last of the brood was Santiago. He was the clown; always impatient, but never unentertaining. Santiago was desperately searching for a lady, especially an American one. So when the subject of our transportation came up, Santiago quickly offered his services. What he did not explain was that his parents and their two precious pooches would be riding along.

After we hopped off the still-moving city bus, I thought it was the end of bad travels. Stumbling to the door with over-packed luggage, I made an attempt to ring the doorbell. The reaction was frightening: dogs barking, maids screaming, and an irate mother clamoring for the knob. I would have sprinted back to the bumbling open-air bus if Santiago's mother had been one second longer. As the door flung open, Andrea and I shot each other equally panicked looks. There she was, Santiago's mother: beautiful, composed, and small, but more graceful than a runway model. She did not realize that we had heard the insanity taking place before she opened the door.

She welcomed us inside and offered lemonade. As we waited for Santiago, she gave us a tour of their home. She was an artist. Her paintings were modern and all oil. Pastel-shaded horses and wild gardens were her main themes. Somehow they captured a piece of Mexico that can not be explained in words. Mexican wives are dealt a difficult lot. They are not allowed many freedoms. From a young age males are revered as the breadwinners and family patriarchs. The girls are taught to talk, but not too much; cook, but not eat; love, but not for enjoyment. Her art expressed frustration. It was contained beauty: horses trapped in a wave and wandering gardens stifled by looming fences.

Santiago and his father finally arrived. Santiago's impatience sprang from a very close well. Sr. de la Madrid rushed us to the carport and off we were. The de la Madrids were up front, while Andrea, Santiago, myself and the two pooches were crammed into the backseat. Mexicans have a hangup about piling as many people into one automobile as possible. The excitement of the ride never ended.

The highway from Guadalajara to Puerto Vallarta is a beautiful drive. Just past the city lie the end fragments of a northern mountain range. With the region's year-round pleasant weather, the flora is always in bloom. The hills are covered in pinks and greens. It reminded me of a quilt that my mother bought at a garage sale in Mississippi.

There was little time to capture the glory of the road. From the moment we crawled into the car, Santiago and his father insisted that we sing. Luckily, Andrea had a beautiful voice. My deep chords were relegated to Billy Joel and Elton John tunes. We must have sung "Piano Man" ten times. When it came time for a roadside stop, Sr. de la Madrid would give us one minute. We would fumble out of the car, looking like a circus clown show, and sprint into the restrooms. He stood at the door screaming out the seconds, laughing the entire time. Senora never complained though. She would just climb back into her seat and pet her prized poodle, Shadow.

Sr. de la Madrid had a heavy foot. His love of speed led to the climatic moment of the journey. After zooming over and through several twisting mountain passes, the mother announced that she forgot to give the dogs their travel medicine. Andrea and I were

immediately concerned. Santiago, who had been sleeping for the last five renditions of “Born in the USA,” woke just in time to hear his mother’s concern. He grabbed Shadow and began shaking the poor animal. The father at warp speed began swerving all over the road. I was about to lose it; I could not imagine what the five pound dog was feeling. After Sra. De la Madrid finally forced her two children to stop playing, we thought that God had shown us his greatest mercy. Just after I finished my prayers of gratitude, Shadow lost it all over my shirt. Luckily, the other poodle, Bijou, hit Santiago.

We eventually arrived in Puerto Vallarta and I was seriously questioning Andrea’s character judgement. As soon as I laid eyes on the gorgeous beach, all was forgotten.

For the next four days, we were a part of the Royal Family. During the day the entire clan would take out the sailboats and cruise around. Andrea and I offered little help. We would sit on whichever side needed more weight and dangle our legs over the edge. Hours would pass as we exchanged dreams. Someday we planned to have our own boats and sail them to every port in South America. Living off mangos and Latinos, we would wear only swimsuits and sarongs. Through these fantasies, Andrea and I built the strongest friendship. For the next few months, we never left each other’s side. She taught me how to be a friend, how to give and receive trust. A good friend is more precious than most anything. We had come from entirely different worlds and met in a dreamland, but it was the insanity of it all that made our friendship so honest.

After sailing the days away, we would return home for the grandest meals. Mexican mothers can outdo a Southern woman in a hospitality contest any day of the week. From the second we walked in off the beach we were showered with drinks, hors d'oeuvres, smiles, and compliments. For hours we would sit by the table, exchanging stories and sharing company.

Once a man with a peculiar accent welcomed us. He introduced himself as Eve and I guessed correctly that he was Dutch. Years ago he was the Ambassador to Mexico and has not returned home since. He knew the De la Madrid's because they were an old political family. Santiago's great uncle was once the President of Mexico, although you would never know it from Santiago's lack of diplomacy. Eve enchanted us with tales of his adventures during the war and afterward. Visitors like Eve were common and always charming. Often Andrea and I were forced to perform. She would sing and I would tell a story. Meals were the most important part of the day; lives were made around the table.

Once the feast was cleared and the rum extinguished, it was time to hit the clubs. The beaches offered a variety of nightlife, but the best clubs were reserved for the Mexican Royalty. To be admitted was more than a challenge; some people would stand at the door for hours. We always walked right in. The music blared and the floor was full of lights. Everyone was dressed to impress. Lucky for me, I had gone to a high school where being a good dancer was of utmost importance. Andrea and I would blow everyone away with our moves. I even won the dancing contest once.

One of the guys, Javier, owned a Porsche. It was red and fast. After dancing till the sun came up, we would all pile in the convertible and race around town. The freedom of those mornings is inexplicable. We were so young, with the wind blowing through our sweat drenched hair, racing toward the sunrise.

It was all incredibly superficial. Andrea and I would laugh at how spoiled we were. For years, I had condemned the rich, complaining that they abused their wealth and did not care for the needy. I still agreed that the advantaged should give to those who have less even while I was sipping champagne on a yacht. But I was young, really young, for the first time in a long time. Carefree and childish, I woke up every morning certain that that day would be special.

By the end of our trip, Andrea and I had been to the beach almost every weekend. The good and the bad of being a member of the Mexican elite had become more obvious. The boys had charmed us at times and repulsed us at others. Knowing that this was not our life to own we enjoyed every minute, but were grateful that we could recognize that life did exist outside of it. Life is not about the boats and bars; rather it is families, their stories and their seas that make each day better than the last.

Fall 1997

Manzanillo, Mexico

True Cliches

Travelling in Mexico is always an adventure. The airlines offer unlimited drinks and are usually filled with vacationing Northeasterners screaming out “Viva Mexico.” Flights within Mexico are hard to book and overpriced. So unless one is Evil Knivel and willing to die in a rental car, taking a bus is the only option.

The bus lines range from the *roosters and pigs can ride too* type to true first class style luxury. From the clientele purchasing tickets, it is pretty obvious which choice a couple of young American girls should make. Mexican men have no qualms about making their affections known. The moment young women walk into the bus terminal all heads turn. At first, the attention made me incredibly nervous. I could picture my name on the front page of the home newspaper with a quote from my mother exclaiming, “I told her it was dangerous, but she never listens to me.” So just to make sure mom would not have the last word, I always paid the highest prices.

The top line form of highway travel was the ETN Bus Company. The seats reclined until the passenger was nearly horizontal. The air conditioning was more powerful than an arctic blast, and movies were played from the second the bus left the terminal. The choice of films was always fascinating. Each trip had a theme, from late seventies pseudo-porn flicks to the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. We would depart the bus expecting either huge cartoon amphibians or discoing prostitutes to hop from every conspicuous corner.

The first time I rode the ETN was with my friend Andrea. We had been going to the beach with friends for the past few weeks and decided to try it on our own. Our university had a travel agency, so we made all of our plans there. Skipping class on Friday, we took a taxi to the bus station. Taxi rides were a part of life in Mexico, but regardless of how routine they became it was always an adventure. On this particular trip, we met Edwardo, the song writing, Elvis obsessed, on-the-side taxi driver. The moment I announced that I was from Memphis, enthusiastic renditions of “Love Me Tender” and “Ain’t Nothin’ But a Hound Dog” came bursting from his lungs. Traffic lanes do not exist in Mexico, so driving is more of a creative expression than test of skill. By God’s grace, we made it to the station, and in record time.

The bus station is a mad house. People with luggage of every variety are hustling every which way to find the cheapest fare. Andrea and I had been advised to head straight to the ETN counter and follow their instructions. After our luggage was wrestled from our hands and chunked onto some ancient type of conveyor belt, we were hurried to the bus. Earlier that week we had heard about a place called Manzanillo. It is a beach town about five hours from Guadalajara. Mostly Mexicans versus annoying American tourists vacation there. Figuring it would be a good change, we headed there.

All week we had been asking people for advice on a good hotel. There was no clear winner, so after arriving we just hopped in a cab and asked the driver to show us a few. As soon as we left the station the beauty of the region caught our attention. Tall, smooth hills covered the area. It was very green and the air was moist. We could not find the

ocean, but the hills obviously ran out a few miles away. The city was much more rural and undeveloped. The streets were narrow and lined with trees and wildlife. One cobblestoned path lines the coast. To get to the hotels, this was the only route.

Our excitement had been building since we left the bus stop. Manzanillo was already different from the other beach towns. There were few taxis, neon-lit bars, airbrush T-shirt stores, or all the other accessories that accompany a tried and true tourist pit. The mystery of the lone trail that led to the paradise resorts enhanced our enthusiasm. Then we saw the first hotel. Thrown up against a cliff, the Vista del Mar Motel like it would not hold up against a light gust of wind. It was the Bates Motel of Mexico and we quickly flipped from the travel book page on fairly cheap motels to top-of-the-line resorts.

When we asked our driver if the Las Hadas resort was a nice place, he answered with a resounding and comforting “Si!” As we drove through the iron gates and through the row of palm trees that hides Las Hadas from plain view, Andrea and I understood the driver’s confidence. It was the most glorious site. Rows of startling whitewashed, arched bungalows and buildings adorn the overhanging cliffs of the small and tranquil cove. Flowers of the rarest colors were tucked into every corner and vibrant green trees spring from the remaining patches of grass. As we were escorted out of our chariot-taxi, I noticed a delicate sign hanging above the entryway. It read, “Las Hadas, el cielo del mundo,” which translates into the familiar cliché, “Heaven on Earth.” This was the truest use of a normally trite saying. I had indeed found paradise.

For the next three days, Andrea and I sat by the sea under personal cabanas sipping lusciously sweet drinks. The transparent water was so buoyant that one could float undisturbed for hours. The Arabic-influenced structure held secrets under every arched passageway. The rooms were open to the sea air. The entire front wall was a window facing the bay. I kept expecting a Philippine midget to jump from under the bed and scream, “the plane, the plane.” It was a fantastical place. I could believe that I was a part of it.

On the last day of our weekend, I swam far away from the shore to get an entire view. It was so quiet and peaceful. I turned on my back and floated with my eyes towards the clouds. As a child I loved taking baths. I would fill up the tub to the brim and sink into the sudsy water. With only my eyes and nose exposed to the air, I would dream of being anywhere but there. Some kids dread bath-time, but not me. As soon as I plopped into that basin of steam, I was transported to places of adventure and magic. Every night I would burst from the bathroom all wet and wrinkled, and run into my mother’s room to recount the tales of my latest journey. But even my wildest childhood imagination never dreamed of a place as fantastic as Las Hadas.

As the gentle ocean currents rocked me from the edges of dream and reality, I was overcome by the purest sense of gratitude. It was all so unreal, this life, this place, and yet, I was there. As a child, the first time that I could reach the two ends of the bathtub was a memorable occasion. For months I had been holding my breath and stretching with

all my might; even with arms, fingers, legs and toes extended I could not reach. When the tips of my body finally touched the slick walls, I had arrived. I was big enough to be somebody.

So several years later, in a tub immeasurably larger, I began to stretch again. This time stretching not for identity, but for lack thereof. I felt no sides. Turning, flipping, swimming deep and then breaking my way out of the water, I absorbed the immensity of that moment. I no longer needed boundaries to identify whether I was big enough or not. I was special and thankful for it.

I carry the magic of Las Hadas with me everyday. The time there was dreamlike. I never knew such beauty existed and I am grateful for experiencing it. I could tell a hundred other stories of Mexico and how it changed me. The smells, the noise of the streets, the passion for life embodied by an entire people could take up pages. But it was that moment that I twirled around in the sea that expresses the magic best. Mexico fulfilled me. I have never laughed so freely, cared so little, wanted no more, and smile so much. All the planning and searching that I had done to that point, Mexico, were worth it, but Mexico was my reward. As I dipped and dove underwater that day, I could see myself clearly for the first time. I was completely happy.

Fall 1997

Puerta Vallarta, Mexico

When you least expect it....

It was the last day I would spend on the beach. I was filled with sadness. The anticipation that always accompanies a journey's end had begun to crawl through my thoughts. My friend Andrea and I were walking along the beach for our last morning stroll. We had greeted the ever-welcome muffin man and heartily consumed his product. The merchandise sold on a Mexican beach runs the gamut. The vendors have no concept of target marketing. The idea of hot, fat-ensconced muffins being paraded in front of thousands of bikini clad vacationers would be absurd in the states. In Mexico, muffins are tame compared to the hot milk, raw fish, and wool blankets being thrown at willing customers.

My favorite of the beach vendors did not sell tangible merchandise. They were the wheelers and dealers of "good times." Parasailing, deep-sea fishing, club tickets, and any other recreational sport could be found. These vendors are the heralds of truth. Many visitors to Mexico try to figure it out. If only they would listen to the cries of the Good Time vendors, then the secrets of Mexico would be revealed to them. It was this day, my last, that I finally found Mexico and Mexico found me.

Our bus for Guadalajara was not leaving until late that evening, so Andrea and I had all day to spend in the sun. About ten minutes after polishing off our muffins we were approached by a catamaran dealer who made an offer we couldn't refuse.

"Sailing, pretty girls," was his most frequently used sales pitch. He was surrounded by five or so other catamaran guys, but it was his less-than-ambitious demeanor that caught

our attention. Immediately we sensed that he was out on the beach not to make money but to avoid making money.

“Edwardo, but friends call me Fast Eddy,” he greeted us. The reason for his nickname soon became obvious. He spoke broken beach English faster than a California valley girl at the prom. “You have good time, I have good time,” was Fast Eddy’s motto and he was bound and determined to live up to it.

We made the deal: the equivalent of ten bucks for an entire day of sailing, plus a few beers at a beach dive he wanted to show us. So the three of us climbed onto the 5’ by 8’ tarp that made for the floor of the shabby sailing device. As soon as we got past the hoards of vacationers filling the shallow ocean, Eddy began.

“Take off the shirts, bikini time; it party, si,” was his first attempt to make us have a good time. We figured what the hell, and off went our shirts. “Where ya wanna go? I know everywhere. I show you Elizabeth Taylor cabana. I show you secret cave. I show you whatever, one thing... we gotta go to get beer half way.” Andrea and I were instantly entertained by Eddy’s enthusiasm and so we agreed to go wherever he thought best.

It was a glorious day. The sun was high and bright. The water in the bay was a color blue that few could imagine. As I grazed my hand through the waves I thought back to the first time I saw an ocean. I was thirteen and it was in Biloxi, Mississippi. The water was filled with mud and it seemed more like a river without another side. I had been

counting the days until that trip for four months. Finally, my first vision of sea.

Regardless of Biloxi's rudeness, I was still enchanted by it. If only I had known then that one day I would be racing through the Pacific waters on a one-man vessel with a Cockney gal and a crazy Mexican, I would have kept counting.

"Dolphins, dolphins, girlies, see," Fast Eddy screamed. We turned to the left and realized that we were being followed by five of the most beautiful creatures. Earlier that month I had gone diving with dolphins in a small, enclosed bay. I played and rode with them for hours. The feel of a dolphin is like nothing else. Their skin seems fabricated; like a mix of plastic and leather. They are the most trusting animals. I learned a great deal from playing with them. They were so gentle with me and playful, but it was as if they recognized their vulnerability. One threatening move on my part and I would have to spend ten minutes regaining their trust. They weren't childlike, because they were patient. Dolphins taught me pure wisdom: believe in others and their goodness until a threat presents itself, then be cautious, but always be willing to trust again if trust is deserved.

"Faster, girlies, wanna go faster," smiled Eddy. We were having the time of our lives.

The three of us nestled together, feeling the wind run us through the waves. For a person raised ten hours from any shoreline, it was odd that the ocean had become such a friend. I couldn't imagine being without it.

“Beer, who thirsty?,” demanded Eddy. We figured he deserved one. “Look, see the island, that where we go.” Ahead of us was this dropling of sand with a few scattered trees, some rocks, and a collection of shacks. I wondered if we were going to run into Gilligan and the professor. Fast Eddy never really slowed down, so we hit the beach with a thud. I flew off the catamaran and Eddy got a big laugh out of it. It was a trick he had pulled many times, but he still laughed. After we anchored “La Babsita,” the shabby Hobie Cat, into the sand, we headed off toward the shacks. Andrea and I were becoming anxious. Fast Eddy could have taken us for his *babisitas* right there and all my mother’s worries would have been proven true. Instead we were greeted by thirty or so filthy, half-naked children screaming, “chicas, America, USA, blonde babe, si.” Every child in Mexico recited whatever English they had picked up from television or the latest Will Smith movie. They could smile. Mexican children can out-smile any American kid. After a few minutes of playing with the kids we staggered toward the shacks.

Anxiety struck again once we realized that these shacks held the precious beer and fish that Fast Eddy had been preaching about. The name of the joint was Bob’s. No one knows why it’s called Bob’s. There certainly wasn’t a Bob for miles. We sat in one of the four tables and a Pacifico beer was immediately placed in front of us. This was a deciding moment for Andrea and me. Were we afraid of the big bad bacteria or would we once and for all become Mexicans? I had eaten every type of street fare from Tacos to Dogos, so I grabbed my Pacifico by the neck and slugged her down. It was official; I had crossed over. Andrea soon followed me. Next came the cevechi. Cevechi is raw fish that has been marinated in lime juice. Supposedly the acid in the juice rids the fish

of any bacteria, but it's always a risk. We ate it and loved every rebellious bite. The owners of the beach dive were married and claimed several of those mud creatures that had bombarded us upon our landing. They had lived on the island for ten years. They went inland only when their supplies were completely depleted. Besides Fast Eddy, these were happiest people I had ever met. They caught their fish and grew their vegetables. The beer was distributed to them once a month. I didn't suspect that they were hiding from anything, except reality.

Fast Eddy, on the other hand was hiding from something--two wives and a girlfriend. After his first beer, Eddy was prepared to reveal his life story. All of Eddy's family had left Guadalajara years ago. Most of them went to the states; he had not heard from any of them since he was teenager. As for Eddy, he saw no need to leave Mexico. When he was fifteen he left Guadalajara to live on the beach. He bought a catamaran, hopefully not the same one we were using, and began his life's trade. He met his first wife in a bar in Mazatlan. She was a stripper and he loved her body. They were married a week after they met. She still lives in Mazatlan, three hours north of Puerto Vallarta, but has found a new profession in her middle age. They have one son who visits Eddy occasionally. Eddy loves this arrangement. He loves his first wife and his son, but only has to see them whenever he feels like making the trip. Eddy's second wife is from Guadalajara. He is not so fond of her. Apparently, she is more demanding. "She always say come home; I home," laughed Eddy. "She always want money; what money?" he continued to chuckle. He has not returned to Guadalajara in years. So far his avoidance theory had worked. It had worked so well that he took on another girlfriend. This one was much younger and a

local. Fast Eddy had no plans to marry her though. "I marry you two. I love American girls. Want to marry American girl, have blonde baby." Fast Eddy had a most unique way with words.

We sat and ate for hours. The company may have seemed strange to many, but they were some of the most important people I had met in my life. As we made our way back to Puerto Vallarta and the bus that would take us home, I was quiet. Epiphanies happen so rarely. Over the past few years, I had been blessed with a few. Once again my entire life was coming into question. I had had it all planned before my travels. Every goal and achievement had been scheduled into an eternally fixed agenda. Now I was wondering why. Fast Eddy was unwavering in only one thing, his happiness. He had no agenda. He probably could not even spell agenda. The Bob family had no plan and they were utterly content. I, on the other hand, planned when I would have a nonexistent family. Finish college at 21, work for a few years, go back to school, get married at 27, and have kids at thirty. That was my plan. After meeting a gypsy boy in Puebla, Mexico; a handicapped, deaf couple on the boarder of Germany and Switzerland; a Jesus as tall as a skyscraper; and a crazy, hobby-cattling bigamist, it no longer made any sense to me.

It will be years before I would sort out the confusion invoked by Fast Eddy, his island friends, and all the others before them. I am still figuring it out, but I learned more about happiness and contentment through them than any other.

All Travels

From Memphis to Wherever

Par Avion

Regardless of location or how difficult it has been to find me, one thing has always been constant: letters from my mother.

They began the day after my high school graduation, when she left me this note in a journal that she had given me:

I began this by first locating this book in the devastation of your room. While the room is truly in shambles, it is the clutter of a life lived, so far, to the fullest and most successfully. My first step into your room landed me on a Presidential Award for Academic Achievement, which was lying on the floor amidst senior yearbook rubble. I couldn't resist picking it up and placing it, along with your Coca-Cola lapel pin, in a bit safer place on your desk. I picked through a few pictures and salvaged the Miss Ridgeway picture I like so much and also found a medal for highest GPA in track. The awards and scholarships have come so frequently, I think I have lost sight somehow of what an accomplishment you have made. But what I am most thankful for is that you have done it and remained true to yourself. Over and over in your annual, people complimented your achievements, but remarked on how nice you are. "Pretty is as pretty does," still goes a long way.

Sarah, until you have a child of your own, you will not know the love I have for you. It is there no matter what life choices you make for your future. It was there whether you won a single scholarship or prize. It will be there if you graduate college, get married and raise four kids, or if you don't. You are my daughter and I love you. Remember that as

you make future plans. So many decisions are out there and you are so talented, but don't ever forget what true happiness is. Always picture yourself down the path you are contemplating and see if happiness is there or only fame and fortune, for fame and fortune can be very lonely. You have so much warmth, others are naturally drawn to you, but as you *succeed*, things and people tend to isolate you from the everyday experiences, and without ever realizing it, you move into another world. Just watch out. I know it sounds as though I am holding on to you and holding you back. I'm not. I just know how eager everyone is for you to be something so remarkable and how much pressure and desire there is in you to do something unique and spectacular. While I know you are capable and gifted in every way, I also know my role is to be sure you understand trade offs, that you make each decision and not just let circumstances make them for you.

Six weeks ago I was having a very difficult time with your graduation. Your high school years have been what everyone imagines they should be. Your friends are so dear, your teachers so supportive. I have enjoyed so much my role in your life. But mostly, I was anticipating the empty place here without you. Letting go is so horribly painful. I should be used to it by now. You have been forcing me to let you prove yourself since you were three years old and only wore the clothes you picked out from the store yourself.

Thankfully, I was able to recognize the value in letting you make whatever decision you were capable of making and you have proven yourself an overwhelming majority of the time. But this letting go is so different. This is a life-changing stage. You are leaving home, and when you return it will only be to visit. I will miss you more than words

describe. But I will be here, as always, cheering you on, watching to see what path you take, praying that you seek the Lord.

Sarah, remember that you are never alone, and you are loved just for you. No one demands that you constantly perform. Be kind to yourself. Eat chocolate, eat bread, but eat your vegetables, too. These are pleasures in life, and it's okay to partake. Love yourself; accepting who you are is the most important thing you can do. Remember you are a child of God and my heavenly gift. If you ever need a hug I am always here. Congratulations, you've exceeded everyone's expectations and you have done it with beauty, style, and grace (but a very messy room).

I Love You! Mom

P.S. I like the Joanna Fields Quote, "I began to have an idea of my life, not as the slow shaping of an achievement to fit my preconceived purposes, but as the gradual discovery and growth of a purpose which I now know." Keep an open mind. Your purpose in life will unfold before your eyes.

As an eighteen-year-old, I did not have much time or patience for her advice. I wish I had listened to her words more carefully. There is so much truth in them.

Over the years, she would send me many more letters. Most of them were intended to catch me up on life at home. My grandfather's cataracts, my sister's lovelife, the dog's

fighting were common topics. She would always end them with small tidbits of wisdom or encouragement. My mom has an incredible ability to sense what I am going through. Once she sent me a note that simply said, "Everything is going to be okay. Love, Mom." I had not spoken to her in weeks. She should have had no idea that I was having a hard time, but still she knew.

The last note came just a few weeks ago. The cover read, "Happiness resides not in possessions and not in gold. The feeling of happiness dwells in the soul." Inside she wrote,

Sarah, I wanted to write some meaningful, sentimental phrase to express my love for you, how proud I am of you, my confidence in you, but words don't express that. If you want to know those things you must see how my face lights up when you walk in the room. Listen to the joy in my voice when I hear yours on the phone. My wish for you is that you have in your life the love, happiness and fulfillment that you have given to me.

I love you and thank you, MOM.

December 5, 1997

Northwest Airlines, Flight 522

It all begins with the seatbelt sign. That is the moment that home becomes a reality. Suddenly, anxiety slaps you in the face. For months I had been away. I felt like a completely new person. Would anyone understand who I had become? Even more frightening, would anyone care? The plane drops slowly at first, and then, as its fall picks up speed, the pressure forces you deeper into the seat. My heart sinks right along with the plane's altitude. Partially excited to see familiar faces and partially terrified of what they will see back, the returning home is as crucial to the experience of travel as is the leaving.

The last moments of solitude, while the stewardess reminds me of all the things I habitually do anyway, are poignant and powerful. The descent of that December fifth flight was probably my most difficult. After I exited that flight I would face an uncertain destiny. During the last few months, many life-changing conclusions had been reached. Most drastic of all was the conclusion not to conclude, but to live in anticipation instead of expectation. I had stopped making lists months ago, and each day had grown more enlightening, joyous, and gratifying.

Through the window, fragments of Memphis beneath the clouds were becoming recognizable. As I noticed familiar roads and rivers, buildings and boulevards, my anxiety began to fade. A calm took possession of my fears. My thoughts cleared.

Reminding myself of Vera and her strength, I loosened my grip on the armrests. I had been blessed with caregivers like Vera throughout my travels; they were there when I

needed comfort and reminded me of how giving is the true gift. Regardless of how much or how little wealth I possess, if I embrace life with a giving spirit, I will receive from it. Traveling and the people met along the way teach one to be grateful for the gifts and the ability to give. Gratitude is the stepping stone to happiness.

When I was a child, my grandmother would ask me why I prayed. I would always reply, “to say thanks to Jesus. Thanks for the sun and the sky, the moon and the sea, but most of all thanks for mommy and me.” As a child I understood. I did not pray for help or for something even more. I just wanted to say thanks.

Somewhere between five and twenty, I had stopped being so thankful. The lists of life had taken over the joy of gratitude; what I wanted superseded all else. On one of the two hills in San Sebastian, Spain, I was humbled enough to say thanks again.

I heard a minister lecture once on the expectations of man. He pointed out that if he were to ask anyone in the audience what was the greatest virtue a man could possess, he or she would most likely reply, “unselfishness.” But if he were to pose the same question to a person one thousand years before, the most likely answer would have been, “love.” The most exemplary quality of man today has replaced a positive meaning with a negative one. For years I had been telling myself that I should be this or I should be that. We live in a world based on supposed-to’s. We realize that we are not supposed to be selfish, but what are we supposed to be? Nothing. Throwing the supposed-to’s in the garbage that

day in Germany was the bravest thing I ever did. That was the day that I began to love again; first myself, and then everyone and everything around me.

Gratitude and love are the two fundamentals of my life. It is funny how life has it's plan for you and there is very little one can do about it. As the plane's tires hit the runway and jerked my entire body forward and then suddenly backward again, the order of my life became clear. Every trip led to the other. Each lesson served the next. I could not have appreciated Mexico in 1994, and it would not have appreciated me, either. Vera would not have been as special in 1997, but 1997 would not have made sense if I had not known Vera before. The years of lists were necessary for me to appreciate life without them.

Each day of my life had been a journey, regardless of where I had been or where I was going. As I rose from my seat, and waited for my turn to exit the plane, I knew that each day would continue to be a journey. If I wake and retire each day with gratitude, and if I allow love to serve as my reason for living, life will reward me. Each day will continue to be better than the last.

As I made my way down the corridor, I could see my mother and sister at its end. Life was waiting for me, and I was ready to receive it.