Road to the Jetty

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My mother stepped off the train in Los Angeles in 1952 with a suitcase, my dad, and the heart of a country girl. His scholarship to study for a PhD at Caltech arrived on their wedding day a few months earlier and mom assumed he would earn the degree and they would re-board that train east, to settle someplace like Waukesha, Wisconsin or Perry, Iowa. She believed that Pasadena was a temporary home, but the reality of those smart guys is that they feed right into the Jet Propulsion Laboratories.

Her city-fate began to seal pretty quickly when her belly soon swelled with my sister. Dad took a part time job logging heavenly data into a notebook atop Mt. Wilson at night, but when my egg came up fertilized, he had to quit school to make a living. The Lab offered a salary to tap his brain for theoretical equations and my parents moved out of student housing. In a few years they had a third daughter, and made a down payment on a rambling Mediterranean style home, backed up against a canyon in Altadena. The brilliant physicist and his uncomplaining wife began building an earnest life in the tangerine lined avenues of the San Gabriel Valley. And it was good.

Fast forward to 1969 Los Angeles, a frightening phenomenon that overwhelms our mother. Violent racial conflict, free love hippies, Timothy Leary, Charles Manson, “give peace a chance” to let the commies invade us liberals, integrated schools with long bus rides, sticky smog keeping recess indoors, sexy album covers with evil lyrics, and all sorts of mind-altering drugs. Raised on meat, potatoes, and an occasional breakfast sparrow shot from her grandmother’s porch in the heart of the Midwest, our mother’s brain synapsed since birth toward a conservative belief system she can not shake. She is nervous. She paces. She nails our bedroom windows shut.

Our dad is no help. He sits in a large green leather chair throughout my childhood, noodling equations until the wee hours, emerging with interesting thoughts and ideas from time to time. For relaxation he restores a VW camper van, erroneously causing my friends to think he is cool. He plots weeklong excursions for us around the state. My mother was forewarned early on, at a Caltech symposium for wives, to accept that she would always come second to his brilliant mind, but apparently back then she had stars in her eyes.

Her eyes have cleared by the time I enter high school. She begins sharing nostalgic visions of her own childhood with me and my sisters—bike riding down country lanes, swimming in small lakes, trips to the dime store for malts with Shirley Mae and roller skating to the movie house on Friday night. These are simple and fun activities I feel I have my own legitimate version of in Los Angeles. I have a backyard pony whom I ride with abandon in the hills above Altadena each day. I bodysurf at Newport Beach in the summers, and I’m on swim team at the Caltech pool. I eat deep dish apple pie at the Saltshaker and see 2001: A Space Odyssey on an Imax screen. I own two pairs of roller skates, one keyed like hers, and also

modern shoe skates.

Mom says she wants us to have seasons, crisp fall leaves and dustings of fresh snow. I remind her I have pollen and mold allergies and has she forgotten our snow-filled trips each year to Mammoth, Arrowhead and Big Bear? I like my version of childhood, very much, in fact I love it. I am a happy child in Los Angeles. I am on top of the world.

But her nagging desire grows. She is determined to keep her daughters safe from LA's evil, to show us a sweeter life. Apparently she thinks it is still 1950 in the Midwest and on a fateful day in July of 1972 we pack our things into a truck and drive outside the zone of mayhem and corruption that my sisters and I call the good life, into a no-mans land: Cache Valley, Utah—Happy Valley to locals. My sisters and I travel the entire way from Los Angeles to Logan in the bed of our new truck, pulling a rickety horse trailer stuffed with end tables, boxes and my startled Shetland pony. I gallop him up and down the sidewalks of Las Vegas during a dinner break. It's hot at night and his wide eyes reflect the colored neon. That night I toss and turn while he sleeps at the Cedar City fairgrounds.

The next day we pass by Salt Lake City and climb over the southwest rim of the valley, descending into the dark depression of land for the first time. I recognize Tennyson in my head, *Charge of the Light Brigade*. My first impression is bleary-eyed—my regular tears dry in the wind, but the allergy tears, the itching and sneezing ones, gum up my vision. A raw green scent hangs in the air—a summer peril we will come to identify as fresh mown alfalfa. I sense this is a cruel cold slap in the face of a place and I am right.

This is the summer between my sophomore and junior year of high school. My transcripts follow me from a Catholic school of one-hundred bright, promising young women set on the grounds of a historic mansion in South Pasadena—to a large, boxy yellow brick Mormon school, funneling rural kids from every hamlet surrounding the college town of Logan, which has its own high school. It is an ignorant lump inside acres of corn fields and I am disoriented from day one. For one thing, the breeze reeks constantly of compost from the Del Monte factory and carries a foreign train whistle to remind me every few hours how lonely and miserable I am. I flatten a lot of sad pennies on those tracks before it becomes truly boring to walk down there at all, train or no train.

That summer I discover that towns here are divided into squares, called wards. The streets head out from central tabernacles in four directions: north, south, east and west, sporting numbers instead of names. You can literally locate any address by imagining it in your brain. The symmetry is intriguing, but sadly unimaginative compared to the winding, well-named streets and varied architecture of my old neighborhood. Each ward has an identical brick church, governed by a bishop, and ward bishops make regular reports to control central in Salt Lake City where documents are stored in a huge building. Clearly they are a well organized crew.

"Have you read *Brave New World*," I ask a girl from down the street who shows up with a basket of welcome things. "Lozzie, no," she giggles an acceptable local swearword. I search

her eyes for signs of intelligent life. I glean more information about special underwear, levels of glory, baptizing after the fact, an inability to drink liquids including soda, coffee, tea, wine, cocoa, and beer. “What,” I ask the neighborhood kids, “does all this depravity have to do with the golden rule?” Which I have been taught is the basis of religion. I bring up some other Gods I think would be a better fit for them. Less picky, and okay with the drinking and sex they seem so fascinated by. “You can switch over,” I say. “No reason to carry around all that guilt about it.”

We are both confused over these ideas, but I don’t recognize my own confusion. In hindsight, I think the confusion was mine alone. As soon as I left for college I’m guessing they were probably fine.

The kindly bishop of our ward finds out I play piano and tells my mom I can practice at the church. I walk down there one morning, the door is open, and I fire up the pipe organ. My dad plays organ and we’d had one at home. I know how it works and I’ve just learned a great version of *Light my Fire* by the Doors. It sounds very cool with the foot pedals reverberating on the stained glass windows. Bishop soon shows up and directs me to a dark room in the basement with a scratched up piano and tells me, in a kind way, that bare feet and cut off jeans are not allowed in the house of the lord. I want to tell him god is not that superficial, but I don’t. I stop playing piano.

My parents have a Mormon friend in Salt Lake City, a middle aged, sparkly-eyed flirt. Soon after we are settled he visits and calls me a scamp. I take him walking along the railroad tracks with my Shetland pony in tow, a couple dogs at our heels. He accuses me of being Circe – the sorceress who can seduce animals and men, alike. I am just sixteen and charmed. Had I known anything about gay men I would have guessed this right away.

“How do you like it here?” he asks, trapped and perspiring inside his cufflinks and tie.

“I don’t.” I say flatly, walking the warm rail in bare feet and ragged 501’s.

“What would make you happy, if you could have anything?” he asks, that mischievous twinkle in his eyes. He has a steel hook where his right hand used to be.

I’ve just seen the movie, *Rascal*, and answer, “A raccoon.”

The following week he shows up with a young raccoon in a large cage. I name him Bubba. This is truly good. Numerous Bubba stories float in my head still, like the time he got out while I was at school and chased my mom around the house until she locked herself in the bathroom, leaving Bubba to do what unsupervised raccoons do.

I am enchanted with Bubba, but not consoled. I have given up too much. I keep him on my shoulder that fall, walking endlessly, the pony trailing behind, a dog beside us. We make a remarkably homesick little huddle, a dot on a large gray map of nowhere.

My mother, in contrast, is filled with excited expectation. She has discovered music. She is wearing out *I Am Woman*, Helen Reddy’s cassette about being invincible, and John Denver’s *Rocky Mountain High*. I observe her getting to know our friendly neighbors. “Marlene invited me to steak house,” she says, giddy and proud of her social success. She feeds us canned chili

and spends an hour getting ready. “Lock the door behind me and don’t wait up!” An hour later she is back, and starving. It turns out stake house is not red wine and filet. It’s a meeting place for Mormon females to quilt and can and pray and other stuff we don’t do and never will. This is a real disappointment to us all.

School begins. The first week is especially eye-opening. I am called to the office three times – for bare legs, wearing slacks on a non-football day, and insufficient hemlines. The latter they eventually accept when my mother admits to the principal she can neither sew nor afford all new dresses for me. Although we’d worn uniforms at Catholic school, we were free to shorten and adorn them—embroidery, colorful socks and tights, undershirts and over-shirts, braided daisy chains in our hair. New saddle shoes were passed around the circle at lunchtime, decorated in hippie motif with rainbow felt pens, like plaster casts. I missed those heavy, comfortable, sweet smelling leather oxfords and my checkered blazer. Secretly, I loved the ease of uniforms – pink, blue or yellow? Socks, shoes, done.

Right off, I ask to transfer out of daily Seminary class, which apparently no body has ever wanted to do before. “I’m not Mormon and never intend to be,” I am tired of the principal and his office. He says I need my father to sign off on my blasphemy, he will not take my word nor that of my female progenitor. I suspect him of thinking my clan’s alpha male will force me to go. “My dad’s an atheist,” I tell him flatly, “he isn’t going to make me.”

School, in Smithfield Utah, is how I imagine a high-end prison camp. A large lobby-like student lounge area lays in the center of the building, in sight of the main office, glassed in floor to ceiling and the only place students are allowed to congregate. Men wearing bright blue suits station themselves at the entrance during breaks. I watch them dispense guff geared to the passing student, and notice they are familiar with each student’s extended family. I find this immensely interesting. The football team, buzz-cutted boys in numbered jerseys, get the most good-natured razzing, expertly dodging playful noogies. All the underhanded grabbing and touching creeps me out. I don’t know why.

The idea of a football team both fascinates and nauseates me. Here’s why. I’m figuring it must be the dumbest guys who volunteer to go onto a half frozen field in ridiculous, and let’s face it, embarrassing clothes to be purposefully injured. Yet they appear to be popular. Is this like some kind of weird Shirley Jackson story, a scape goat lottery situation? Or is it a misguided sacrifice for glory like enlisting in the Vietnam war? It isn’t logical for them to be popular. Yet, I watch the popular girls, bangs stuck straight out over caked-on faces, compulsively pursue their attention. I am tempted to walk up and ask them, point blank, “what gives.” I don’t. But it is definitely something to wonder about that first fall.

Friday afternoon football games are preceded by a ritualistic hype session in the gym. These raucous events are required, raising my hackles. I have mostly been allowed to make up my own mind what to attend in my life and I have no desire to witness a second one of these.

Instead, I decide to go behind a ball shed in the back field for a smoke with my new and only friend, Rianne, who relocated from Los Angeles a few days ago. She is Mormon but LA

Mormons grow up with winding roads, sharing blocks with Catholics and Baptists and drinking coffee, all of which must broaden their horizon. The first time I see Rianne she is standing in the hall with bare legs and I know right where she is headed. I practically pounce on her. Her long, brown hair is plain and straight, and the freckles covering her face in hues of brown seem like stars in the sky. To my immense relief, she is disoriented. Both of us turning up here confirms the scientific equilibrium of coincidence. She smokes Marlboro Lights that she steals from her mother's purse and we take up smoking with a zeal neither of us had in California.

We are having a wonderful time getting better acquainted over a few cigarettes behind this ball shed in the cold sun, when two blue men round the corner and apprehended us.

"Were you spying on us?" I ask, incredulous. In hindsight I understand why they were unable to answer my question. "Okay fine," I say, "I'll put it out, but then you tell me where kids go to smoke. Someplace you don't sneak up on them." At the time this request seemed perfectly reasonable.

The principal hears us out and issues passes so we can sit, during rallies, like animals on display inside the glass-partitioned lounge area. "This is unacceptable," I tell Rianne. The cage and the crowd mania in the gym both feel like punishment.

"Can we hang in the ceramics lab," I ask the principal. "We like clay."

The answer is no because there is nobody to supervise us. "For clay?" I say, "What supervision is necessary for clay?" But the answer is still no. I have been game so far, for a round of public high school, but it isn't working out. In hindsight, it's obvious that someone should have intervened on my behalf.

I take to ditching school on Fridays at lunch, making my way through tall, dried stalks of corn in the general direction of our rental house. If I know my mom is home, I'll stamp down a circle of stalks big enough to sit inside and watch clouds go by for a few hours. Sometimes Rianne joins me in this little nest and I get her to sing songs we remember from California. *Knights in White Satin* drowns out the intermittent cheering and desolate train whistle.

I am easily acing my classes so they can't classify me as a delinquent. Yet here I sit in a cornfield, sluffing (the local word for truancy) and smoking—technically delinquent. In hindsight, I like to imagine the principal, good-naturedly smiling, tenderly, to himself, as he sends me back into the fray, but I have no way of knowing if this was true.

I begin complaining bitterly to my mother about everything. I've had enough. Her responses run a gamut of, "Fine, go back and live with your father," to "I appreciate your support so much, you are my wonderful daughter," to "You'll just have to learn how to make your own fun."

Well, I long to go back and live with my Dad of course, but our home has sold and the situation there has changed. He and my older sister are sharing a small apartment, waiting to see what happens. That choice feels scary. Our dad has been offered a professor job at BYU but each time he visits us in Utah there is conflict. "I'm not a teacher, dammit," he hangs his head at our kitchen table, sliding his cellophaned pack of cigarettes back and forth on the oilcloth. I

grab my little sister for a walk to the tracks. In hindsight, I probably should have taken the leap and moved home with him. I would have found my strength and my game much sooner in life.

As for being a wonderful daughter, that is a double-edged sword. I see my mom wake up in the morning with red and swollen eyes. My little sister, quite remarkably, has refused to speak to her or in her presence at all, for seven months. These things make me profoundly sad. I weigh compassion against the shit hole that is shaping up to be our life here in Utah and I walk a narrow line.

I understand why she left Los Angeles. I do not agree, but I can see her perspective. For a teenager to see a parent's perspective is not really an asset. Teenagers are supposed to feel safe enough to do some damage, a bit of unreasonable screaming and door slamming. I consider staying out late, maybe getting drunk, I could total a car just to take the focus back, but I don't.

I take the third option and set out to make my own fun. In fucking, fucking Utah I am going to make some fun with this pile of jacked up fanatics who think Latter Day Saint is a race of people endemic to the Wasatch front and not a simple set of faulty beliefs they can choose to abandon at any time.

I make up my mind to discover what there is here, for fun. I try some Mormon things, go to some ward events where the kids are truly nice but I don't fit in. Rianne and I, who live on opposite ends of the valley, talk our moms into dropping us in Logan on Saturday evenings, at the Tabernacle Square. We make huge piles of leaves and take turns jumping in them. We smoke cigarettes and talk. When it's cold we walk to Bob's and drink coffee. One night we meet some Logan kids who seem to be having fun. It turns out they mostly smoke pot and drive around aimlessly. This is because, unlike in LA, there is no place to go. The car itself becomes the destination. And when the proverbial crisp leaves are gone from the trees and the temperatures drop alarmingly with the dusting of snow, I realize I am going to have to find a pot smoking boyfriend with a decent heater and stereo system on wheels.

I was not much of a toker in California. I was already impressed with the way things were when they were ordinary. I'd drink some wine at parties, the few I had been allowed to attend before I was whisked out of the real world, but mostly I didn't seek diversion by substance. This is not to say I didn't make trouble. I am a natural born instigator; the idea person of trouble. For instance, freshman year I convinced my circle of friends to skip Mass and sneak over to the convalescent home a few blocks away to take Christmas cookies to the inmates. This involved raiding a tray in the nun's private kitchen. There are so many infractions here, but I was never called in. My Catholic friends who followed my lead were reprimanded by Sister Catherine, but I never was. Maybe as the lone non-Catholic their expectation of me was lower. I don't know. I learned the word instigator from my friend Lucy, whose mother was sure she would not have thought of something so bad by herself. She was right. I looked instigator up in the dictionary and in hindsight the term leader would have been more helpful to my self-esteem.

Neither had I wanted or needed a boyfriend in California. I was busy with horses, my friends, babysitting jobs, art and writing classes, piano lessons and the instigating of mild

trouble around my neighborhood and at school. I had wild crushes and a huge appetite for kissing boys when the opportunity arose, but I didn't see a reason to take a particular one on permanently. I laughed in the face of a Catholic boy who wanted to "make love." You can't manufacture love, idiot.

But now, it's cold. Cold wintertime in Utah and I am going to need a reliable boyfriend who is available to get me out of the house. I pick this senior guy, Dave, from the Logan high school that Rianne and I met on one of our drifting around Saturdays. He has the bluest of eyes and the blondest of hair, a deep and wobbly voice like I've never heard before and a style of kissing I know can last the winter. His car shines deep cerulean blue and has a cushiony leather wrap with holes in it, around the steering wheel. He comes to the door and introduces himself to my mom. I shift from foot to foot as snow piles up on his windshield, knowing he will like her more than is necessary. Everyone does.

He opens the door and I slide into the passenger seat, smelling like musk oil and Herbal Essence. I watch him move around the front of the car. He lifts each wiper blade already frozen to the glass. Once behind the wheel he looks over at me. "What?" I say.

"I can't believe I have you in my car." He moves a suitcase of 8-tracks into the back and motions me closer, inserts Emerson Lake and Palmer into the player and wraps an arm around my shoulder. And we drive. We smoke his pot. I turn up the music. I like the dreamy image of snowflakes in the high beams that appear to open up like a tunnel, engulfing us. To save on gas, we park. He slips in *Dark Side of the Moon* and for one minute I forget I am in Utah. These things, plus the soft deep back seat of the warm car, lead me into situations where I am no longer a virgin. Ah, the simple country life.

Mom.

By senior year the trouble I am getting into is no longer mild. I'm more than an instigator. Is she noticing that rural kids of the 1970's are not riding bikes down dirt lanes nor roller skating to a malt shop? They make their own fun now with sex and drugs that cause accidents, alcohol abuse and unwed pregnancies. This happens no matter where you live, but at least in California I had choices. My best friend, Rianne, will graduate from this desolate high school, pregnant. And I'm going to add here that she is really happy about having something meaningful to do after graduation.

I don't need to spell out the irony of the bottom line, but I want to and it is that I am trying all the things for the first time that my mother dragged us one thousand miles across the desert to avoid.

The one thing we have escaped are negroes, an innate condition of 1970's Utah. But I manage to befriend the only black high school student in Cache Valley – an interracial friendship I could never have pulled off in LA where the black kids hung together hating the white kids for killing Martin Luther King and also for our general lack of cool.

"Casadario," I say to him, "what the hell are you doing here in this god forsaken place?"

"What are you doing here, Little Bird?" he is mysterious and often replies with a question

of his own. I don't bring Cas home because his color will make my mother uncomfortable and I can see she is having a hard enough time working her way through the divorce. It's too bad because Cas has a hearty-sounding laugh that can lift spirits, and he is the kind of guy who makes his own clean fun. She would appreciate that about him.

Toward the end of my senior year a bunch of us pile into cars with the pretext of a youth concert at the Salt Palace in Salt Lake City. A few of the kids may actually plan to go to the concert, I don't know, but most of us just want freedom.

Some person tells about a spiral jetty at the north end of the Great Salt Lake, an hour or so from the Golden Spike where the railroads east and west join together. I'm thinking about how this jetty was put in place just a few years before our distraught and idyllic mother moved us to northern Utah, effectively changing the outcome of our lives.

I did not intend to know about this spike and this jetty and I never expected to visit them but we head north to Brigham City in the late afternoon. By now, I have some real appreciation for making my own fun. And this is it: driving stoned across the salt flats in a jam-packed four on the floor pick up truck under a full moon in search of spike and a jetty.

I can try to tell my friends in Los Angeles, "here's what I am doing tonight," but it will be lost in translation. They are doing archeological digs on Catalina Island and planning internships at museums and theaters and hospitals. From the very start they shunned Utah, just because I was moving here, but then they shunned it a lot more when I was home visiting my dad last summer. I wondered out loud at a party, "What is this amazing song?" It was the *The Rain Song* and it had been out for months and I agree it was shameful.

"What the hell," they said, protectively. "You need to move back, now."

The round moon casts grayish light over the dry flats as we speed along dirt roads. We find the spike that night, but not the jetty beyond. A month later, the very morning after cap and gown, I leave for California, never to live in Utah again.

Unfortunately, soon after I'm gone, our mother concedes to being dunked in a recessed bath under the trapdoor of a Mormon alter to become one of the flock. My sister reports she held her nose. I feel an obligation to rescue our little sister, abandoned there, but once I'm safely back in California the whole thing feels kind of like a dream I don't want to drift back into. Our mother recovers her senses within the year, a brief stint as latter day saint she soon regrets. Although she can't rescind baptism, she is free to ignore it.

That fall, I leave my dad's cozy apartment in Altadena and head north to San Luis Obispo. Lucky for me a childhood friend, applying to Cal Poly, mailed me the forms and a graphic arts teacher at Utah State walked me through the application process. "You are getting out of here if I have to fill this out myself," he said. I vaguely remember my essay as some sort of desperate plea to be rescued from the oppression of rural Utah and my parent's stupidity. This is how I made my way to college.

I never shed my Southern California roots; but with hindsight I have understood the roots I gained during those years. The image that comes to mind is of a bug's eye. In one

ommatidia is rural Utah, in another, Los Angeles. There are dozens more now, but those were the first two.

The compound eyes of a bug. Multiple realities, crystal clear. It's how I imagine the fourth dimension, inherently resilient—no wrong, nor right, nothing set in stone, yet making perfect, orderly sense. These mosaic-like eyes, osmotically formed during the traumatic years I weathered, allow me to legitimately agree with two opposing viewpoints simultaneously—without compromising them, or myself.

Unfortunately, and even dangerously, they also render me clueless about what I should know, and don't know. I am ridiculously open to possibility, any place I end up.

Which most of the time is fine, but certainly, not always.