

Gone Sane



by Jill Marie Warnes Maier

Solo Road Trippin'

Midwest, Rockies, Canada and Alaska

2009

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~ Wild Child ~

Tomboy no frills, bike thrills no hands

*basket, base, kick, tether, see where those balls land
queen of fooseball and Ms Pac Man
chillin' in the public library stacks
ran away to the woods, planned to never come back
watched the freight trains click and clack
learned to roll with different folks--
wheelchairs, buddies, young and old,
athletic, artistic and differently abled
played concerts at local nursing homes
escaped into nature and books
riding bikes, rescuing cats, and walking dogs
can't recall a time when I was bored.*



July 16, 2009 Farewell Rockin' Cheeseheads

I don't look crazy. Or gutsy. I'm shy. Cautious. Hard-working. Not the kind of person that should be getting shaken down at the Canadian border. But here I am, unhappily cooling my heels in the lobby of a customs checkpoint outside Blaine, Washington, while three Royal Mounties comb through half of my worldly belongings. I've dreamed since I was a teen of going to Alaska. I'm now a 37-year-old professional, and the authorities in my life seem to be doing their utmost to prevent me from achieving that dream. I have been sitting here for an hour now and I want to scream. But maybe it would just be smarter to start at the beginning.

I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, town of bars, breweries, church steeples, good people, beautiful parks, and great Lake Michigan beaches. I never loved the city. I do love nature. So I survived daily concrete overdoses by spending as many waking moments as I could in the pockets of woods and series of parks and trails that wind along the shoreline and through Brew City. I was a soft suburban girl, but also a wild child.

When I was a teen, the suburbs were green fields, horse farms and wide open land. By the time I'd reached my late 20s they'd been developed. Farms and fields were replaced by malls and business parks. Good for the economy, maybe. Although the recession didn't bear that out. Definitely not good for the young married woman who thrived on nature and wilted in urban sprawl. Nor was I happy as a suburban home owner working a structured week. My husband couldn't imagine living any other way.

Tired of standing in the dust of dreams, I decided to raise some of my own. The ink was drying on my divorce decree as I packed my little red Chevy S10 and looked thoughtfully at Lake Michigan. The skyline from Bay View's South Shore Park is glorious-- day or night. Architectural variety and beautiful night lighting made this one of my soul havens. My last morning in Milwaukee, I rambled through South Shore Park recalling all the farmer's markets, picnics, walks with friends and solitary rambles I'd taken here in the past ten years.

This road trip I'd planned through several of America's National Parks, the Rockies, British Columbia, Yukon Territory and Alaska was a longtime dream-- something I'd wanted to do since I was 16. It was about endings and beginnings, natural beauty, and finding a place to relocate and start again.

Road Trip Route

My pickup was packed solid from floor to dashboard. The passenger side seat held a laundry sack and 2 duffels full of clothes, a tent, books and a box of snacks. I didn't want to stop to do laundry very often, and I'd be going through several different climates and altitudes, so had a variety of layerable hot and cold wear. There were also blankets, a travel pillow, and an emergency road repair kit tucked behind the seats. Maps and snacks crammed deep door pockets. Water bottles sprouted from cupholders.

There was a GPS aboard, but I'd essentially decided to wing it and tucked it away for emergency use only. My AAA membership was current, their online trip planner helpful. So was knowing that AAA cooperates with Canadian road towing agencies. All my bills and banking were being done via phone or online. My laptop was tucked inconspicuously between the seats, hidden beneath a bath towel.

With gas at between \$3.70 and \$4 per gallon, lightening the load was advisable. I considered it, then left things as they were. Each item had been included for a reason-- pleasure or practicality. Somewhere along the route, I planned to purchase rain gear and waders, antifreeze/coolant, a mini hydraulic jack, and gas and water storage containers. If the truck overheated or ran out of gas in a remote area, both it and I would need fluids. As it turned out, refillable gallon jugs of water purchased at discount groceries proved much more practical than a heavy ten gallon water container. I'd wanted a pair of binoculars, but opted to pass because they were \$100. Probably should have shopped online or at a military surplus store for them, rather than at an outfitter.

I'd wrapped my borrowed sleeping bag in two waterproof plastic garbage bags. The friend who'd loaned it to me made it by hand years ago, when she was in Alaska. This seemed fitting. I'd filled a plastic bin that functioned as a larder/kitchen with canned staples, nestled pots and pans, matches, pot holders and metal cups. Beside that sat a small pile of double garbage bagged peat log firestarters. They'd be dry when I needed them, and were guaranteed not to be infested with tree-killing emerald ash borers or pine beetles.

My 10-foot yellow kayak angled the length of the truck's short bed, overlapping the tail gate by two feet. I'd strapped it down with bungee cords, a system used so often in the past on Wisconsin river kayaking expeditions that it had become routine. Two self-inflating air mattresses and the life vest and cushions for the kayak were strapped down underneath it. None of my friends or family were free for a month or willing to do this kind of road trip. So the boat and the truck would be my companions on this adventure.

Milwaukee's a good place for music, parties, working and living. It just wasn't where I wanted to be anymore. I hadn't yet seen any of the places I'd once promised myself I would see. I'd said my goodbyes. It was time to go. Depressed and scared and exhilarated and relieved all at once, I locked the door on my tiny apartment and headed for the highway.

The driver side door slamming sounded like freedom. For possibly the last time, I relished the variety of flowers blooming in July gardens lining Bay View streets. My little red truck dodged a fox trotting casually across the street, and I wondered if it was the same fox who occasionally sat on a friend's deck taunting their dogs through closed glass patio doors.

Then a long span of concrete bridge lifted my truck into the sky, past the water treatment plant and salt mountains stored in preparation for Midwest winter. Big music festival grounds sprawled along Lake Michigan's shore beneath the bridge, while domed churches and the wide Milwaukee River slid by the driver's side. Ahead, the city skyline loomed larger and larger. Its sprawling mix of modern and classic architecture beneath cloudless blue skies delighted my eyes.

Driving north into Lake Shore Drive sunshine, I watched waves hitting the breakwater and boats skimming. I said silent goodbye to the immense white sailboat-inspired art museum, the 3-masted schooner in Milwaukee's deep water harbor, and Bradford Beach's hot volleyball teams. Watching trendy young East Side couples holding hands or doing partnered exercise routines, I tried to stifle my envy. And then laughed myself silly at the guy in front of me driving with one long leg operating the accelerator and his left bare foot hanging out the driver's window. Suddenly I had "Don't Worry, Be Happy" running through my mind. And I was smiling.

As I drove, the suburbs changed character-- arty, industrial, manicured green-- then turned into rolling farm country. The radio sang me up North. My first night of camping I got as far from people as I could, needing to hear myself think.

Skeptical when I saw signs warning of elk crossings, I mentally reminded myself I was still in Wisconsin. Elk?! Unlikely. But this wasn't the concrete domesticity I'd grown up in. I was Up North now, in Hayward, six miles off a 2-lane rural highway on gravel roads. And the elk standing in the roadside ditch looking at me were as big as my truck.

“Hi guys,” I breathed. Unimpressed, they went back to grazing as twilight fell over the scene. I drove onward cautiously. Animals that big would make a hefty dent.

Weeds ate their way through blacktop and gravel, and the road shrank visibly every few minutes. Roadside underbrush waved wildly despite the lack of breeze. My eyes weren't quick enough to spot whatever I'd frightened away. I missed the turnoff twice, but the lovely lakeside campsite was completely worth the effort of finding.

Moonlight gleamed across quietly rippling water on Moose Lake. I turned off the engine, drank in star shine and simply breathed. The air smelled of pine and peace. One other car was parked in this isolated place, and I considered exactly how rude it would be to pitch a tent at 10pm, and how smart it would be to sleep in it. I opted to rearrange my belongings until I could stretch across the cab. Doors locked, windows cracked just enough for a cool breeze, I drifted on a cricket lullabye. Then an undulating chorus of another kind rose with the moon. I listened, fascinated, until the wolves fell silent and I fell asleep.

Deep in the night, I awakened to the sound of snuffling. The big dark shape outside defied my attempts to see it clearly with a flashlight. I wasn't tempted to get out and investigate. It moved heavily and smelled rank. I held my breath as it explored briefly, then left. In the morning, bear tracks confirm that from now on it would be wise to store food securely before turning in.



~ Growing ~

Come, brisk sweep cobwebs from this mind's dusty edges

and gently polish dullness from worn soul

Watch blooming petals unfurl in fragile splendor

Enjoy newfound freedom in an awesome world

As day dawns brimful with new thoughts and things

pack away the old dead hopes and dreams

Plan now for great feats and feasts to come.

July 17, 2009 Midwest Mileage



Hayward, WI, is beautiful, I realized as I munched a granola bar and sipped juice beneath tall pines in dim early morning light. Due to overcast and drizzle, the kayak stayed in the back of the pickup. I often paddle in warm drizzle. This was distinctly chilly.

Fortunately, landlubber sightseeing was delightful. A bald eagle swept from his perch on a tall ash a few hundred yards away to pluck a trout from the shallows. Perfect water clarity allowed me to spy two more trout dart beneath the shelter of a snag as the eagle flew away with breakfast flapping in its talons.

Rain pattered softly on windows and trees as I drove into the lunch hour. Windshield wipers shushed, tires hummed on pavement, rivers, trees and villages receded in my rearview mirror. Getting out to stretch at the Chippewa River, I marveled at thigh-high horse-tail rush and perfusions of cattails and arrow weed. In southeastern Wisconsin, where I spent most of my life, it's difficult to find waterways with naturalized banks and abundant wildlife. Unfortunately, rain drove down hard and cold on this ideal kayaking spot. I got back in the truck.

Morning passed uneventfully as I drove through woods and along rivers. Or perhaps these were events. Water dripped quietly from leafy canopies. Deer grazed placidly in roadside fields. Managed pine forests of varied ages, herds of dairy cattle and fields of hay rolled by.

I paused for lunch at the St Croix River's Fritz Landing. To my stupendous joy, it stopped raining! For 5 whole minutes. The St Croix was ideal for relaxed summer kayaking, with a mellow current that would allow paddling both up and downstream, as well as plenty of bends and twists, vistas and wild things. But the temperature was 53 degrees Fahrenheit and raw. I opted to avoid hypothermia and headed west looking for sunnier, warmer conditions.

Minnesota's Route 77 stretched into deep green distance. On the theory that where there is one deer there are likely to be others, I braked after spotting a doe's rump disappearing into roadside trees. A moment later her baby walked carefully across the road. The fawn's big wary eyes never left my truck, and I hadn't the heart to scare him by scrambling for a camera. A few seconds later, the deer disappeared into the underbrush. I drove on with a smile. Some moments are so perfectly beautiful they imprint themselves permanently within.

A fork in this pretty rural northeast Minnesota dirt road was a major event, and cell phone reception nonexistent. I'd searched madly all afternoon for a signal so I could call my three regular check-in people before they developed ulcers. Finally, the phone chimed, telling me it had reception. I pulled gleefully off the road. And kept the calls short, because a huge white Newfoundland barked stern orders for me to get away from his gravel driveway. I wondered how a bright white moose-sized dog fared against hungry, well-camouflaged Minnesota wolves. If the climate suited him. And if he'd be dumb enough to chase my truck all the way to Colorado.

It was dinnertime before I reached Voyageur Park. The campsites were all full. This was resort country with rooms available, but I was traveling on a tight budget and reluctant to sleep inside. So I crossed a bridge to Dove Island, marveling at expanses of surf-tossed lake. RVs, houseboats, and homes of every description dotted the contemporary coastline. Long ago, before safe, settled towns, trappers and Native Americans navigated these wide windy waters in wooden or hide boats infinitely more fragile than my 10-foot fiberglass kayak. My respect for them grew immensely. There may be plenty of upscale developments hugging Superior's shores, but her weather and water remain untamed.

Minnesota black bears aren't very bright. I saw my first in the middle of the highway at dusk trying to figure out which way to run. It took him a good five minutes to make up his mind.

Driving onward past several more crowded campgrounds, I found one picturesquely tucked into a lovely stand of old growth hardwood. There were kids and hotdog-roasting adults and bonfires in abundance, but no vacancies. Fudge. Finally, I halted at a rest stop off Highway 11 with a good sunset view. A song I'd never heard before came on the radio-- "All I want to do is shelter you." Its tenderness tugged at my susceptible, bruised heart. Tonight freedom felt lonely. But I had become accustomed to that. I turned the radio off and stretched across the seats for a well-earned rest.

~ poetry jones ~

Rhyme flow

express emo

or ideals

grappled thoughts or hopes

no more expendable

than limbs--

this pen

~ Technical Vertigo ~

Modern society

Mythical privacy

Phone tapping

GPS tracking

Computer hacking

Airwave snatching

can't Mapquest

heart of matter

hearts of darkness

We're still

lost in space.

July 18, 2009- Minnesota North Dakota



Although it appreciates the occasional armchair, warm meals, heat and running water, my muse dislikes civilization in general. Perhaps I overdosed on Jack London as a teen. For whatever reason, I was happiest away from cities and major highways. Wide open spaces and silence are infinitely appealing to me. At least in theory.

Northern Minnesota along Rte 1 was flat, boggy, rainy, and full of skeeters. Because those bogs are so verdantly green and rich in life, I wanted badly to explore. So I liberally sprayed on the bug dope and fearlessly sprang forth from the truck. Then retreated flailing back to the safety of the cab when several hundred hungry mosquitoes descended on me like famished folk fall on a room service entree. There's not enough OFF in the world to discourage Minnesota mosquitoes.

I was further north than I was accustomed to, and cold and damp crept beneath my jacket and gloves while I gassed up. Inside, the station were cocoa, egg wraps, and a lady owner who had lived in many parts of the country. I scarfed warm food happily as we chatted about places she'd enjoyed traveling to and settling in. Her love for her family showed through, and I missed my friends and mom already as I dropped back into the driver's seat.

But homesickness was forgotten with a glimpse a wide lovely lake, floating like a mirage beside the road west. The rain stopped, and indirect cloud-filtered light turned the Red Lake iridescent silver. It stretched tantalizingly away, coves curving coyly just at the edge of vision. I followed its shoreline for hours, enthralled by the marsh grasses and trees that grow to the edge.

Contrasted with Superior's wild, rocky, bared-teeth beauty and Michigan's mercurial moods, Red Lake's subtle shifts of light and water murmured peacefully. Gentle ripples stretched infinitely and there wasn't a condo to be seen. This was my second experience with Reservation land, and it seemed amazingly unspoiled. Fantastically formed storm clouds scudded over clear silver water as I rolled along Routes 2 and 32 through small towns. Laid back reservation dogs watch patiently as the truck trundled past. Chasing cars apparently was beneath their dignity.

Approaching the Minnesota/North Dakota border, I sang along to the radio and windshield wipers as rain continued periodically. Buffalo ranches cropped up, huge animals like furry boulders grazing placidly in the downpour. The ranched llamas were much more amusing. One long-necked mischief maker had plastered his nose to the kitchen window of the big white farmhouse adjoining his pen.

North Dakota contains enough bogs to satisfy even me, avid lover of undeveloped land and bird habitat. Trash pickup and litter patrol were obviously done regularly, North Dakota's pristine roadsides maintained by various local organizations. I laughed ironically as "Adopt A Highway" signs proclaimed that Sentenced to Serve maintains the stretch of highway right beside a small town National Honor Society. Hey, whatever works!

At Hillcrest it finally stopped raining and quiet, clean rivers flowed by below pale, rocky bluffs. The call of blackbirds floated in clear air as I drove through deep green rolling hills. North Dakota has more National Wildlife Reserves than any other state, and there are little marshes dotted everywhere. It was both practical and magical-- bird habitat preserved in areas farmers would find difficult to plow anyhow.



The birds I grew up watching were far behind me now. Rather than fat mallards and stately Canada geese bobbing on large lakes, mixed flocks of diminutive waterfowl crowded mini marshes. Small and brown, they swam and gabbled and grazed contentedly. Killdeers rather than gulls seemed to be the primary aerial scavengers. They, too, were less aggressive and smaller than their Great Lakes cousins.

Stretched along Highway 2, red-barned farms dotted checkerboard fields. Alternating crops of rich deep green and brilliant canary, their bounty spilled down gentle hills like a Monet painting. Above hung a brilliant blue sky dotted with

puffy clouds scattered so low I could've reached up and picked sky cotton. I wished heartily for aerial photos!

Then the crop mixture changed and flat miles rolled slowly by. I like to eat, so won't complain because fertile, productive plains don't appeal to me visually. But by the time I reached Minot I was of the opinion that the settlers were so excited to see a hill that they built a town to celebrate! By now I was also absolutely convinced that America is an AMAZING place, particularly once you get off the expressways.

My best roadrunner impersonation blazed me through monotonously flat terrain for the next 5 hours. Unfortunately, it wasn't empty. Although usually fairly even-tempered, I road raged at other drivers' ability to TAILGAIT doing 60mph while gutlessly refusing to pass in the passing lane going 70.

In the middle of North Dakota I dodged momma duck and a line of 12 tottering ducklings with a maroon minivan glued to my back bumper. The driver of said van was damned lucky he missed the ducks by dodging lanes just a shade behind me. His insistence on nearly driving into my truck bed at 70mph kept me from hitting the brakes. IF those ducks had died and IF all the vehicles and drivers managed to survive, I would have taken it out of his idiotic hide. But other than that and my truly impressive collection of mosquito bites, I had a good time in Minnesota and North Dakota.

July 19, 2009 The Wide Missouri

Garrison Dam campground had every convenience, and thus was noisy and crowded. I'd dodged RVs and biking children to set up my tent last night as sunset approached. Opting for a quick and simple meal of PB and J with applesauce, I'd hiked the dunes and fields before darkness fell. The nearby Missouri River bustled with wake-happy motorboats but the water was clear and the fallow fields around the campground were full of deer and pheasant. And ticks. Which were too tough to squish, so I ended up drowning them. Ewwww.

This morning, I woke to the cooing of mourning doves and the persistent tapping of woodpeckers. The Missouri flowed peaceful until wind rose to blow against current as sun warmed water and thermals swept off river bluffs. My kayak slipped effortlessly into midstream.

Motorboats zoomed by regularly from the public launch a mile or so upriver. I dodged. This was the first major waterway I'd seen in several hundred miles and I wasn't willing to be chased off. The quiet that comes from lack of urban development meant I could usually hear motorboats coming and be well clear by the time they rounded the river bends I was exploring between.

Below me an underwater forests and canyons unfolded. The area was clearly burned before it was flooded and turned into a hydroelectric site, because charcoal lay thick on the sculpted silt bottom. Grazing land abutted the river, and cows mooed and foraged their way down steep bluffs. High water mark was ten feet up, and I wondered if the dam regulated flow or if the river flooded uncontrolled during a wetter season.

Spoonbills, bald eagles and cormorants took refuge from river traffic on shallow riffles. The birds were skittish, and I skirted their resting spots. While hiking last night, I'd found a butchered deer and the remains of a campfire on the sugary dunes, despite "NO HUNTING" signs. I suspected the local wildlife was used to being shot at.

Sun decorated clear water, and I wondered idly what all the fishermen I saw were catching. Beneath me, long purple silhouettes of fish faded from sight too quickly to ID. Strong wind shifted across steady current. I'd been out an hour and a half and was limbered up and ready to hit the road. So I look both ways, listened carefully, and pointed the boat toward shore.

Navigating across one shallow riffle proved impossible without getting out. The water was cold enough that my feet froze numb as I waded off the rocky shoal. Yesterday there were diver down flags in the reservoir above the dam. As I gratefully hopped back in the kayak, I wondered if this counted as cold water SCUBA diving. Brrrr! Wisconsin's Devil's Lake and Lake Michigan are warmer. Superior is probably comparable. I had a skin, but if all northern waters were this cold I'd also need a wetsuit.

Downing my granola bar and juice to replenish after I hauled the kayak out on a white dune near the campground, I watched motorboats race upriver. By the time I portaged the kayak to the top of the bluff, my feet had thawed. 45 vertical feet with a 30 pound weight got the blood pumping. The truck was packed and back on the road by 9 am.

Kayaks weren't common in North Dakota, and my banana boat attracted curious people and looks in the small town where I stopped to mail postcards. By contrast, the biker's Mecca known as Sturgis, South Dakota, was less than a day's ride, so there were motorcycles everywhere. I amused myself by guessing how old the

riders are by how and what they drove. I was usually right. This day I saw lone wolves, rocketers, packs of a dozen or more Harleys traveling in coordinated groups, Nissans, Yamahas and everything in between. I passed a band of trikes-- three wheeled motorcycles-- brilliant ruby and gold and emerald with riders in sparkling helmets flitting over the freeway like giant dragonflies. They looked like they were having a blast!

Gassing up at Zuroff Repair and Filling Station in Hebron, ND, was a mistake. The apologetic clerk couldn't explain why the pump charged 20 cents per gallon more than listed on big fuel advertising sign. Grumbling, I paid up and moved on. That experience surely taught me to check the cost on the actual pump before filling up!

I'd seen a thousand pretty little lakes and ponds between Wisconsin and western North Dakota. Now the land became progressively dryer as I headed southwest. Garrison's dam and hydro power plant made sense due to the briskly flowing Missouri. Here endless sky, BIG wind, and waving grass hills dominated the view. Yet there were few windmills. Occasionally, I saw an oil derrick lazily teeter tottering. How comparatively efficient were wind and hydro and solar and geothermal and fossil fuels? And how might that vary based on region of the U.S.? Without me ever planning any such thing, exploring current and future plans for alternative fuel usage in different regions of the States became a trip goal.

Landscape palettes quickly changed from greens and blues to shades of gold. Then I turn a curve and someone shut the water off. Hard packed sand dotted by sage and yellow gorse stretched away to the horizon. Everyone on the roads seemed to own pickups, most of which make mine look toy like in comparison. I'd driven through farmland onto open range.



~Flight~

Eloquent speeches made

about leaps of faith

certainties and meant to be's

while we're sadly collecting memories

of angry words and mistaken deeds

Conversations filled with jousting

wrangling passionately and endlessly

Where's the trust and where's the peace?

We're too damned clever to be happy

Honey keep on looking

for that angel that you seek

I am just a woman

*can't fly yet, but I'm learning
Love told and shown in understandable ways
we share that simple need
Both struggling, hurting
seeking, trying to be
what we are, what we're not
never giving each other comfort
Love's not a game of sacrifice
Love like this makes the angels cry
I spread my wings and flew today
Cause I like who we are when we're free
One day we'll know the strength of our wings
And reach our best possibilities
find the ones who see us clearly
and truly love reality
We'll reach through the past
beyond the pain
and make loving a beautiful thing
So honey don't stop looking
for that angel that you seek
You'll find her one day
You'll find him inside
And we will find joy
as we fly*

July 20, 2009 Teddy

Rugged Theodore Roosevelt National Park, South Dakota, stole my heart. The North Unit was accessible only via hiking trail and 4x4. I'd sworn to my worried mom that I'd stick close to the truck, which wouldn't handle the near-vertical terrain. So I drove down to the comparatively civilized South Unit, where wild horses are so relaxed they entertain tourists with roadside dust bathing while foals contentedly chew prairie grass nearby.

Here the spectacular "badlands" unfolded increasingly breathtaking vistas around every new bend in the road. A ranger at the beautifully constructed visitors center entertained listeners of all ages with tales of canny mountain lions, normally far-ranging, who all converge on the park during hunting season because hunters cannot pursue them here. Hunting season over, the lions who've been hiding out in protected park lands drift back out into their usual territories.

I lingered over a wide selection of books, used the clean flushable (plumbing had already become an appreciated luxury), then found myself a quiet campsite tucked beneath the hills. The birds didn't seem to mind my mandolin-- they joined right in! I played for half an hour after setting up the tent, then scared up some dinner from cans.

The Teddy Roosevelt driving tour was absolutely worth doing. Hills were rough, shaded by minerals into endless variations of rust and white and blue. Here coal veins ran so close to the surface that lightning strikes literally made the land burn and turned white rock brilliant red. I was fascinated by the cloud formations and the geology of the land, unrolling as I drove.



July 21, 2009 Spearfishin'

Every time I made my promised daily check-in call, Mom told me about desiccated hikers in Death Valley and fishermen and young couples getting shot in the parks. I finally told her I took this trip specifically to worry her out of her mind. There was a nonplussed pause. Then both laughed. And I shrugged. Because I was doing what I needed to do. And my mom would not have been happy in the passenger seat.

Every day began with a prayer -- that my friends and loved ones will be safe and well, that I would not hit or be harmed by anything. Even during 12 hour days as a home health nurse I didn't drive this much. I was thankful for the reliability of my little red S10, and determined to do the maintenance up front so she and I could keep on truckin'.

Every town has services and social hubs like grocery stores, gas stations and libraries. Searching out the ones locals use provides a quick immersion into the lifestyle, opinions and priorities of the people who live there. This hot midday was spent at an air-conditioned library in Belle Fourche, South Dakota, waiting for my oil change and brake/battery check before tackling the Rockies. Randy's Discount Tires sealed and cleaned the rear brakes, as well as doing an oil and filter change. Their handiwork carried me all the way through the 10,000 mountainous miles to Alaska and back to Michigan.

I had a filling Subway veggie sandwich, then escaped the busy city. Spearfish Canyon in the late afternoon offered glorious waterfalls frothing down rocky cliffs and creeks chock full of trout called to hopeful anglers.

I observed quietly the sporting ballet of cast and evasion, laughing to myself. Trout hung out below bushes and rapids. Anglers stood in the ponds above getting frustrated. Beautiful hiking paths wound through pine forest sprinkled with resorts. Along Route 385 I found every imaginable tourist comfort-- from simple ice cream shops to valet parking at Deadwood's posh casino hotels. Strawberry ice cream chilled the sticky afternoon.

Canterbury Music shop in Hot Springs was a congenial spot where local musicians congregated to jam informally throughout the day and many evenings. This business thrived by providing a welcoming place for people to meet and play informally, helped along by the area's band teacher, who also conducted the adult full orchestra. Times were hard, but the recession hadn't taken music out of this town.

An amazing life-sized sculpture horse lured me from the truck again in Hill City, a town near Mount Rushmore. The intricate ironwork whirled and flowed as a real horse's muscles would when running. Kids loved it, and I asked a proud pair of parents if I might take a pic of their happy little ones perched in front of it. They were as tickled by the request as I was by their lively family.

I'd dressed like a girl that day in a long flowing batik sundress. A far cry from my customary oversized T and scruffy jeans look. The sun was sinking rapidly, so I had on shades to block the glare. The parents decided I was a celebrity or paparazzi, and jokingly told the kids they were going to be on Oprah. The camera I'd bought at a gas station because my digital was out of battery was a Kodak disposable, and I was still laughing as I got back into my truck. All around me were people with huge telephoto lenses and RVs worth more than my net yearly income. I didn't envy them. I did doubt Oprah would be calling anytime soon.

Unfortunately, I didn't think to have their parents sign a photo release so cannot include the full pic here. Heavens those kids were cute! And the sculpture unforgettable.

My interest on this road trip lay in wilderness, National Parks, and the occasional art gallery. If I were a painter or pro photographer, I'd spend years in remote places trying to catch all the variations of light and shadow, color, weather and cloud. I'd take portraits of people and sit quietly until animals became accustomed to me and the opportunity for good photos or video presented itself. But I am no pro, and the nature of this trip was drive and click. Often without stopping, since I had 6 weeks to cover over 10,000 rural road miles driving solo.

I learned thus the challenges of getting good photos even in ideal conditions. I also learned to be spontaneous, and was disinclined to make reservations or struggle with unfamiliar technology. This was a journey undertaken for pleasure and healing, not profit. I could not see all of the over 390 National Parks or the over 550 National Wildlife Refuges. I was determined to see as much of America as my time, transportation and means would allow. Public Land is a tremendous gift, a legacy I inherited by being born American. I felt immeasurably lucky.

My lighthearted, haphazard approach probably would not win me an Oscar or a Nobel, I knew. But when I pointed my camera longingly at the glorious moon to be "rewarded" with a tiny image of a white blob, or was only quick enough to capture the rear end of every animal, I could laugh. One day perhaps I would fulfill daydreams of a marketable travel book with pro quality photos. For now, though, I was an unrepentant wild child playing around with her first digital camera. And I didn't think there was a big market for buffalo, elk or mountain sheep buns. Or that I'd be able to retire on royalties from the sale of my travelogue. I knew absolutely that I'd remember this time, these places, and the pleasure of seeing and learning new things daily.

There's much about America to love. An abundance of splendor. This late July evening, an orange sun ducked behind Mt Rushmore. Music swelled as lights came on to illuminate the immense presidential visages carved into the face of the mountain. Essentially, Rushmore is an immense outdoor sculpture gallery. And several thousand others stood staring in wonder beside me.

The campgrounds I'd passed on the way to Mount Rushmore were crowded to capacity. Hotel rooms in neighboring towns were either full or outside my budget. So I got my first taste of mountain driving at night. And wondered if I'd bitten off more than I could chew.

Other motorists took the curvy roads at 65+mph, cursing as they finally passed on the infrequent straightaway. In the one-lane, tar-black tunnels., I took a crash course called Mountain Driving 101. You pass if you survive. Basic concepts to master-- put those headlights on and HONK before you start in!

I lucked out and my trip over the mountain was uneventful. On the far side of the range, I found Spokane Creek Camp in Keystone, SD. And rested peacefully after pitching my tent in an affordable site near a musically flowing river beneath glimmering stars.

July 22, 2009 South Dakota's Gory Details

The smell of bacon frying and the sound of boys tossing a Frisbee to their dog woke me. It was comfortably warm as I crawled, blinking, from the tent at 8am. A shower, clean jeans, quick breakfast of applesauce and granola, and I was back on the road.

Custer State Park featured bison so accustomed to people and roads that they tolerated dangerous closeness. Signs everywhere told people not to approach the one ton animals, and park newspapers explained that every year people die from being gored. The buffalo essentially ignored the lines of cars crawling by. They grazed, walked around, or slept in the lazy heat. But the big animals didn't care for flash photographs or people on foot nearby. Imposing ornery adults snorted and pawed and lowered their heads, protecting big-boned shaggy calves the size of full grown dairy cows.

Pronghorn antelope rested quietly beneath the shade of squat roadside trees. Nearly driven to extinction by their curiosity, which allowed hunters to lure them close with a waved handkerchief, and by fences they cannot leap, these antelope have done well on protected lands. Their big eyes and seemingly delicate legs with tan, black and white markings make more common white tail and mule deer look drab and chunky. Custer's pronghorn looked without alarm at cars stopping as excited occupants get out to take photos. They'd seen many more of us than we of them, it seems.

The "wild" donkeys, too, were quite accustomed to people. A herd of adults with two shaggy babies allowed children to feed them near the parking area. And the prairie dogs were so pudgy they needed extra wide holes! For city folk looking to see maximum animals with minimal time, expense and effort, Custer State Park and the land above Wind Cave are ideal.

At Wind Cave visitor center, wall to wall educational exhibits lined the tour staging area. People watching, eating lunch, playing a little music in the parking lot, and reading all about those fat, sassy prairie dogs filled the hour until my tour left. It seems South Dakota's prairie dog population ran amuck after all their natural predators were killed off. But in recent years' prairie dog numbers became controlled by the successful reintroduction of the black-footed ferret.

Inside Wind Cave's speedy entry elevator, groups of about 10 were packed closely together during the over 7 story descent. Our tour guide cautioned our group of 30 not to get lost, as Wind Cave's tunnels stretch for miles. No one really worried about it until the part of the tour when all the lights went out. Garrett the ranger had less trouble rounding us up after that, since he had the only lantern.

My short tour included lots of good stories about cave exploration and discoveries yet to be made. Based on the large amount of air circulating through Wind Cave, scientists used air displacement to calculate that there are hundreds of miles of unexplored tunnels yet to be located.

Cave formations, even for a happy surface dweller like me, have eerie beauty. I trod softly and tried hard not to touch anything, since the oils from human skin and tracks from our feet damage cave formations. Many of the people around me had been to Carlsbad, Mammoth or other caves. These more experienced spelunkers from all over Europe and the U.S.A were full of entertaining stories and interesting comparisons. There were families with kids, elderly couples, even one daddy cradling baby, who slept peacefully in her jerry carry throughout the tour. For me, the people were as entertaining as the place.

I spent too little time exploring Badlands National Park, SD. An artist or photographer could easily spend months in the 380 square mile North unit before driving south to the Badlands loop. Every light change evokes spectacular shifting shadows. Overnight camping at remote but amazingly sophisticated Cedar Pass campground offers a computerized automated campground registration kiosk that accepts major credit cards. The bathrooms have plumbing. Near dawn, I woke to rising sun painting rocky crags intricately exquisite colors and patterns.

My nature-induced tears of joy and awe turned to tears of frustration a few hours later when I discovered that the man who swore, "I'll always take care of you" a week ago as we sadly separated in the courtroom hadn't picked up the phone to let me know that July 17th he dropped me from the auto insurance policy. We'd agreed to leave it alone until August 1st, when it was scheduled to expire. Maybe legally that didn't fly. Perhaps the road trip risk bothered him. Either way, he or the insurance company could have told me! I'd been driving uncovered since 7/17,

unbeknownst. So I bought a policy over the phone, wincing at the chunk removed from my trip budget. Apparently I was a nonentity with the insurance company until I paid for a policy that was solely in my name. Trying hard to rebuild my life and independent identity post divorce, I found that infuriating.

Muttering about the lost driving time and the chunk of change drained by my insurance debacle, I picked up \$30 worth of groceries at Gillete's Wal-Mart. No more eating out for this little road rat. Too expensive. So it was granola bars, applesauce, PB &J, oatmeal and juice boxes. I was grateful to be eating. Some folks on the streets I passed through weren't so lucky. I wondered, in a moment of doubt, if I should stop traveling and save the rest of the divorce settlement. And then I thought about the lifetime of regret I'd have about experiences I'd missed. Sweaty and determined, I pulled back onto the westbound freeway.

Cruising out of town behind a husky, Hollywood-look biker, I drove over the Cheyenne and Platte Rivers. Crossing a long stretch of golden plain, my little truck paralleled a mile-long coal train. It was an awesome sight, even to a girl who grew up near a set of tracks frequented by strings of boxcars long enough to require a caboose.

Everything seemed bigger out west except the rivers. At Chugwater, Wyoming, I wondered who turned the water OFF. Abruptly, the land was dry and rocky with narrow, steep-banked little creeks or no surface water at all. Seasonal waterways are common, with bridges spanning dry creek beds during midsummer. What they called a river Wisconsinites call a creek. I sometimes found myself missing the vast Great Lakes and Midwestern greenery.

Not so much so that the Rockies failed to take my breath away. It was late afternoon by the time I rolled into frenetically active Estes Park, Colorado. The visitor center's kind staff provide me with a list of local campgrounds, although I stumbled in only ten minutes before they closed. All the campsites in Rocky Mountain National Park were, predictably, full.

Because I was unsure how much ground I would cover every day, I never made advanced reservations. While the National Parks encourage reservations, many set aside a block of campsites for first come first served, with no reservations allowed. While that option would have worked well had I been staying more than one night in one location, the more popular National Parks fill fast, and there is usually no prayer of finding camping within half hour of the parks on a weekend.

That night I lucked out. Mary's Lake Campground in the city of Estes Park, CO was gorgeous, affordable and the people running it were extremely hospitable. By sundown I had eaten a cheeseburger and fries from McDonald's dollar menu and

was picking out tunes on my Mandolin inside my tent. I felt guilty for disturbing the peace, but needed to practice. The neighbors didn't seem to mind much. Their sons were throwing a baseball and yelling happily back and forth. We were all asleep before quiet hours rolled around.

July 23, 2009 Colorado Skies

The city of Estes park has every imaginable food, shopping and art experience. Rocky Mountain National Park's grandeur must be experienced in person. Brown trout gracefully skimmed rock shadows in snow-fed, air-clear, pristine Bear, Dream and Emerald Lakes.

Most alpine lakes were tiny or too remote to get to. The kayaker in me grumbled. Whitewater or urban pond and lagoon paddles abounded, but there were few quiet places to watch wildlife from my boat. It was a fisherman's paradise, though. The mellow brown trout I saw calmly cruising the shallows or hanging out just below rapids enjoying the bugs and oxygenated water had personality all their own.

Range piled upon range as elevations seemed to increase into infinity. Glaciers hung in clouds above sun-baked hiking trails. The continental divide winds through here unpredictably, huge watersheds defined by an invisible dividing line.

Trails are well marked with mileage, but don't indicate elevation. A mile on flat graded trail is significantly less strenuous than one that ascends in mountain-goat enticing 45 degree angles. I joined the crowd of hikers puffing upward toward Dream Lake. A fit 70-year-old passed us on the way up and back down, not slowed in the least by altitude. I had to smile. Breaking in my newly purchased hiking boots, I gladly completed the circuit before I rubbed blisters into my uncalloused soles. It'd been years since Wild Child ran barefoot.

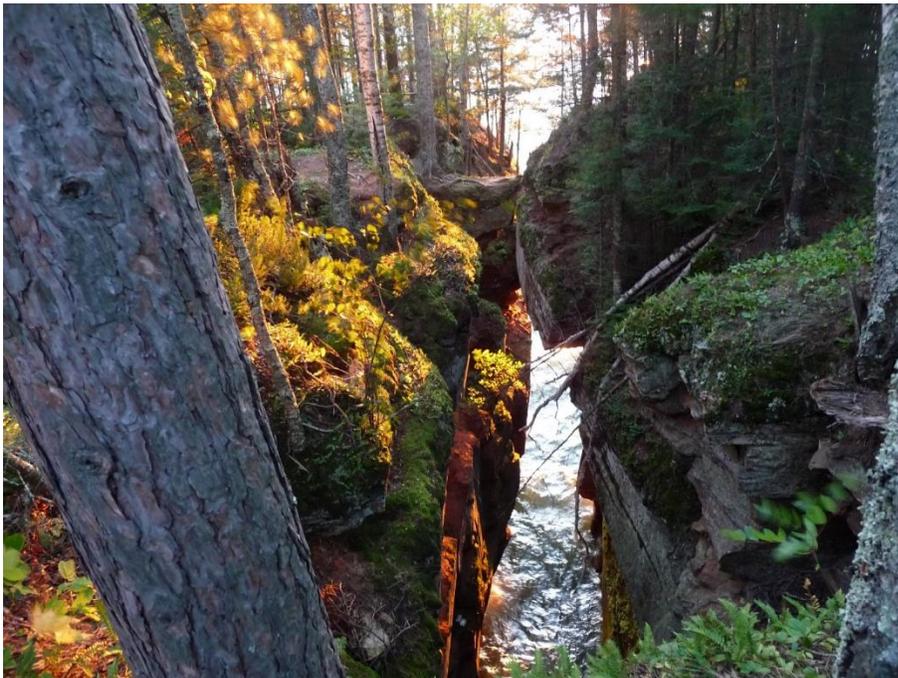
The headwaters of the Colorado and Arkansas rivers gleamed in the sun as they rushed toward the distant ocean. Backpackers, bikers and cyclists calmly scaled roads above 12K. Their endurance astonished me. It was ninety-degree hot at mountain bases, near freezing on top. And some points in between were near vertical. Rocky Mountain roads are beautifully graded and maintained, but passes easily crossed in summer become impassible to vehicle traffic in winter. I thought about attempting this on foot, pedals, or skis and my awe of the athletes I saw only increased. Even on the best summer days, WIND sings or screams around these peaks, pitch and strength depending on elevation. It was impossible to look out over folded and piled ranges and not realize nature's power.

Tiny two-inch chippies, chubby two-foot ground squirrels, and cheeky magpies call Rocky Mountain National Park home. Yarrow and dandelion cling to mountainsides, growing shorter and smaller as elevations rose and temperatures fell. It surprised me that plant life at 10,500 feet in Eastern Colorado was somewhat similar to that found in Minnesota bogs at Great Lake level. I wondered how latitude/longitude and elevation correlated with plant species.

As I drove higher through Estes Park, trees stopped and the ground was covered by a fragile blanket of moss and lichen. Foot traffic damages this fragile ecosystem so badly that wheel marks wagons made in the 1800s are still visible. There are multilingual signs everywhere asking people to stay on the paths. “Don’t tread on me,” the old U.S. emblem, takes on new significance here. Of course, people do.

I’d always wanted to see the Rockies, and they absolutely lived up to my expectations. Here I rediscovered a profound sense of connectedness to the earth that I’d been searching for and missing desperately during my suburban years.

July 24, 2009 Fossilized and Gentrified, CO



Fascinated by the bikers and cyclists, I wound through high mountain passes. They attacked peaks in lines or singly, tucking in to ride on each other’s air streams or doubling up to present united fronts in order to keep from being run over by motorists. They have GUTS. And muscles of titanium. Beyond Rocky Mountain National Park, bike paths wind for miles through Colorado.

So much of America is fenced and farmed that I was unsurprised by reports that mountain lions and bears are finding their way into homes in Colorado Springs. We haven't left them many other places to go. Thank God for the National Parks!

Out of Estes now, I headed south. Denver and Colorado Springs held memories of my ex, so I opted instead to explore less populous country southwest of these major urban areas. Dusk found me near Hartsel and-- surprise!-- every campground within 100 miles was packed.

I followed signs off rural routes, hoping to find a single spot left near the lovely Platte River. Agriculture and ranches meant there were very solid barbed wire fences everywhere along the roads to keep livestock in and unwelcome riffraff like myself out. Fishermen and ATVers cheerfully monopolized all the county campgrounds. At 11pm I crashed in disgust at an open spot in an RV park with truly foul pit toilets. I was gone at dawn.

Stiff from sleeping in the truck, I was ready to get out and stretch by the time I spotted the sign for Florrissant Fossil Beds National Monument. The site, blessedly in my opinion, lacked glitz, glamour, and tourist attractions. What it did have was amazingly detailed fossils of moths, leaves, and giant Redwood trees. Yes, Redwood trees in Colorado-- land of aspen and pine. Redwoods are a rainforest species. And the exhibits at this fossil bed did a fabulous job of explaining the effects climate change wrought on this area over time.

Like most of the country, Colorado has been through many climate changes. It was underwater, then grew a huge rainforest before its current pine woods. Once covered by a vast lake, this land remained wet enough to support redwoods for millions of years, then eventually became the skiers haven it is today. Even those whose imagination is not engaged by solid rock fossilized Redwood stumps 20 feet high standing directly beside Ponderosa pines might find the neighboring historic homestead, the extensive rare fossil collection, the active excavation site, or the "millennium walk" interesting. Signs posted along a winding path through the National Monument's acreage showed how far apart major evolutionary events like the first amphibian, the first bird, and the first record of human life here occurred.

My next stop was Salida, Colorado, where southwestern architecture and small, pretty houses charmed me. Captivated by the great numbers and qualities of artists represented at several galleries, I dreamed quietly of what it might be like to live here. There were vacant buildings, and my nursing license was valid in Colorado. The library was a cool retreat from noonday heat and blinding sun.

I dreamed of river floating, and set out again to find a good spot to drop the kayak in. The Colorado and Arkansas headwaters here were simply too rough for my current skill level. But other waterways wound through arroyos lined with primrose, aster, sunflower, and yarrow. Excited by the kayaking potential of the beautiful White, Blue and Platte Rivers, I searched for quiet water without high volumes of motorboat traffic. There wasn't much to be found. I reluctantly opted to forego whitewater and heavily trafficked routes until I could kayak in a group. It wasn't the bravest decision I could have made, but it did ensure I lived to kayak another day.

By early evening I was driving through scrubby desert known as high chaparral. Enchanted by scents of sage and juniper, and the beauty of shadows shifting across undulating hills, I was rolling happily along when I realized I was no longer alone.

I was moving along at 65 mph with some sort of truck riding my back bumper and I had a creepy crawly making its way up my leg! To make matters even better, just after I passed a ranch called "Southwinds," my little S10 pickup was smacked by 40 mph gusts that continued to play with it for the next 50 miles. Yikes! Now I understand why semis are overturned by wind gusts!

I evicted the wasp without either it or I being killed, but never has a truck window been unrolled so very quickly! Other than this ticklish moment, Colorado was absolutely lovely. My nature nuttiness gloried in every type of rock formation imaginable and wildlife galore. I liked the wildness and openness of the desert.

Early evening found me outside a cantina with a lovely mural, looking for the turnoff to Great Sand Dunes National Monument. Blanca Peak towers over 14,400 feet far to the north of the highway. I guessed they named it "Blanca," Spanish for white, for its color. It actually looked black that evening.

Marveling at scented wind and silvery twilight, I approached a rolling series of dunes. Pulling into a campground frequented by ATVers, I asked the ranger if it was safe to kayak on the lake. A strong wind blew, raising whitecaps. The ranger was carefully noncommittal, clearly just wanting me to pay for a camping spot and get lost. I did so cheerfully.

The lake wasn't visible from my campsite. Tent erected and stocked in three minutes flat, I headed for the shoreline. Great Dunes National Park beckoned from across a long expanse of white-flecked water. At about 13,000 feet above sea level, this desert is speckled with sage and grasses and scrubby bushes.

Opposite my campsite dark pines grew up the sides of towering stabilized dunes. In front of those, younger bright white dunes grow and move. A broad band of

yellow green blooming sage-like bush yielded to silvery tufts of grass, then the wide shallow lake.

I couldn't WAIT to put the kayak in the next morning! Walking through dunes down to the shore, I paused cautiously, hearing a pervasive buzzing. Undulating clouds of insects hovered everywhere. A juniper bush covered in turquoise damselflies caught my eye. Palm-length emerald dragonflies flitted by. It was all just too pretty to believe. Until I looked closely and realized every one of those lovely blue damselflies were voraciously dining on caddis flies. Out over the beach, swooping swallows speedily dipped and zipped as they devoured damselflies. It was a buzzing aerial feast-- eat AND be eaten.

Caddis flies are actually a great protein source, if you're hungry enough. I wasn't. However, they were a welcome alternative to mosquitoes for the simple reason that they do not bite.

Clouds of caddis flies swarmed all around, retreating ahead of me as I walked along the beach. Once the sun dropped behind distant dunes, the wind died and whitecaps disappeared abruptly. The lake shifted from agitated to serene in less than 15 minutes. Grebes dove a short way out on its softly rippled surface, popping up and down and calling to each other as they fed. Peace and beauty reigned.

Back at my dark campsite, I was mobbed by bugs. At future campsites, I figured out how to situate my tent beside an electrical plug in and zip in around computer cords. But on this night my screen attracted flying ants like a flame attracts moths or a bug zapper pulls in zappies. Earlier that day in the city library I'd tried to catch up on email, pay bills, and check in with friends. There was no wireless reception. Now that I was in the middle of nowhere, my wireless worked perfectly! I muttered under my breath about the vagaries of "nationwide coverage," then finished up and crawled into the tent to sleep the sleep of the justly exhausted.

July 25, 2009 Hot Hot Hot, CO



About 7am, I shoved the kayak onto the lake west of Grand Dune. A wonderful assortment of water birds lurked at the marshy edges. They eyed me suspiciously until stopped paddling and floated with the current. Then a V of white pelicans flew over twice to get a good look at me and the boat, decided I was harmless, and landed a few hundred yards off.

The pelicans seemed to be the ringleaders in this world of shy ibis and orange-headed blackbird, gulls, aggrieved grebes, ducks, and killdeer. Changing temperatures on the dunes across the water made fast air currents ruffle the surface of the shallow reservoir. Away from shore it was quite choppy until the sun rose fully. A few two-foot waves curled over the keel. I watched sturdy, palm-sized dragonflies on mid-lake hunting forays, then drifted along the banks stalking a variety of long-legged, skinny-billed shore feeders. By 10am it was flat as glass, frying hot and utterly still on the water.

I portaged out and was bungee cording the kayak down when a park ranger came over to talk. Initially wondering what I'd done wrong, I finally relaxed when he began to tell me about the alluvial wells and rainwater that fill the seven-foot-deep seasonal lake and attached marshes lying in the shadow of Mount Blanco. Locals and park management have poisoned and dynamited this lake trying to get rid of invasive catfish-- without success. I looked at the wide variety of bird life on it, the diversity of insects, and wonder why they care about the catfish. You can tell I'm not a sport fisherman! By August, the ranger told me, the lake is dry. The local ranchers use it for irrigation.

I said goodbye to the informative ranger, broke camp, and drove over to the national park. Great Dune at Great Sand Dunes Park, Colorado, is 650 feet tall and over 12,000 feet above sea level. It was noonish by the time I started climbing. Bad idea. Hottest part of the day. Massive fluid loss. Cramping, fatigue and lightheadedness indicated that I was getting dehydrated and/or altitude sick.

Compared levels of insanity with several other climbers. Laughed in delight at the young (and incredibly fit) man carrying his boxer down the steep series of dunes. Fido's paws were getting scorched by the same burning sand that melted the tread off my aqua socks.

People were sand surfing (or attempting to and sticking to) the steep sides of baked dunes. They had brought surfboards, snowboards, sleds, cardboard boxes, even TV trays. Only the waxed ones worked. Those of us laboring uphill on foot stopped to catch our breath and watch kids from 6 to 56 trying to get their slide on.

Looking back, I realized the parking lot is almost a mile behind me and a very long way below. All around, desert stretched away. In front of us huge buff dunes rose skyward, cutting off the distant smudge of purple or black mountains. Green irrigated fields and dusky rangeland rolled away beyond the edge of the National Monument. The view, and the heat, were stunning. There was no shade, and temperatures on the exposed faces of the dunes reach 140 degrees on sunny days. I kept climbing.

Half way up the second largest dune, I ran into a beautiful German girl just as stubborn as me. We panted and joked our way to the top. I came down a lot faster than she did-- didn't want to pass out. Would do this climb in the early morning before the sand heats up and take Gatorade and energy food rather than just water if I ever do that again. Suspect once was enough, gorgeous as the view was!!!!

If I ever do return, I will pause to build a castle in the broad, shallow creek running along the base of the dunes. People of every imaginable description-- surfers, East Indian families, freckled redheads and bearded backwoodsmen waded in the cool water. I joined in the fun for a little while, then went in search of lunch.

Veggie curry's subtle heat melded well with sticky rice at the East West Grill in Alamosa. Their chervil, sweet red onion and cucumber salad in a vinaigrette dressing revived me with zest! Combined with iced tea and a gallon of water, the meal filled me nicely. I hit the road satisfied.

By early afternoon, I was exhausted but ridiculously happy. The land is awesome. Driving across it I thought about all the climate changes and people who have lived here. Looked at rocky bones, petrified trees, once-canyons that now are gorgeous

reservoirs. Thought about the pros and cons of change. Slavery, 40 acres and a mule, manifest destiny, reservations and war camps, genocide, fear, dreams, and greed. And also lighter things-- such as, "Why did the marmot/ elk/ cow/ family dog/ ground squirrel/ bear/ moose/ insert animal of your choice here cross the road?" I think there were more critters on the back roads of Colorado than people! It was wonderful in a hair-raising sort of way!

Curecanti National Recreation Area in Southwestern Colorado was wide, fast road and windsurfer and kayaker paradise. Flooded mountain valleys created by damming the Gunnison River stretched for miles. Vistas unfolded endlessly, land dropping away sharply as wide stretches of water flowed by. The size of these spaces overwhelmed me.

Again, I wished for a group of kayakers to play with. Boat traffic wasn't heavy due to the rain. I contemplated the wisdom of trying out the very large, completely unfamiliar waterways. Then, after a visit to a passably clean pit toilet, I overheard a mom talking with the group of boaters she planned to pick up. We were downstream from their drop-off point by some 15 miles and the current was quite swift. Probably too fast for me to be able to paddle both ways.

I could have beached the boat and hitchhiked back to the truck, then driven back and picked it up. Assuming the boat stayed put and I didn't get murdered. This plan didn't seem wise. I opted to wait. Again. Wild child and Mild Lady, who inhabit the same body more-or-less peaceably most of the time, muttered darkly at each other. If I didn't get to go boating sometime within the next day or so, they were bound to come to blows.

It rained most of the next day as I explored the Black Canyon of the Gunnison and the beautiful surrounding resort area. At a primitive riverside campground, the fast-flowing river 10 feet from my tent sang me to sleep. The riverside roads were a rollercoaster treat interrupted occasionally by construction and heavy equipment. Cattle ranches alternated with ritzy recreation resorts. People ate in the pretty local restaurants and spent their days fishing and playing on their ATVs.

Colorado's active lifestyle and varied terrain appealed to me. Much of the land is high and dry, with low humidity. Amazing sky, enchanting flowers and breathtaking (literally! some peaks 14,000 feet) scenery. The sizes and types of plants at different elevations fascinated me. So did the people.

The agricultural San Louis Valley is not wealthy. I drove past a couple on a street corner holding a sign that read, "Stranded. Please help." The truck was packed, so I couldn't give them a lift. I was also short on money. But she was obviously pregnant, and I did have one thing they needed. The guy looked at me like I was

crazy as I handed him a jar of peanut butter, a loaf of bread, a plastic knife and some fruit. But he accepted them. He wasn't in the mood to talk, so I moved on wondering what their story was. We all have one.

The Rio Grande off highway 149 was lovely and perfect for kayaking. Unfortunately, the weather refused to cooperate. A glorious and very scary lightning storm hit the valley as I drove through. Big, wide open sky and varied elevations made for really dramatic weather. Cracks of light split low-hanging overcast for quite some time before blinding sheets of rain began. The downpour didn't slow people down any. I pulled off and let bumper-to-bumper lines of cars, trucks and SUVs half a mile long fly by. The wet sage scrub and fresh rain smelled heavenly.

Past Montrose, desert scrub and crop fields began to yield to trees again. It was still pouring, with visibility about 5 feet. The San Juan National Forest unrolled around me as I drove south into the San Juan Mountains. There is a reason this road is called the Skyway. Climbing steadily, I wound through a long series of switchbacks along Highway 550. Towering pines and rugged peaks flanked the truck, alternating with sheer drop-offs.

By the time I reached Ouray the downpour decreased to a steady shower. Ethereal mist-kissed Ouray looked like something out of a classic film-- perhaps Brigadoon. A graceful restored Victorian dominated one corner on a main street full of shops and restaurants. Tucked into acres of alpine trees near the hairpin vertical dizziness of Red Mountain Pass' switchbacks, Ouray seemed a heavenly place to live. I wondered how much snow they get in the winter and how impassible the roads are for how long. Bet the skiers love it!

And then I turned a bend outside town. The overlook to the surrounding valleys provided a view of dozens of people gawking hundreds of feet straight down at the river far far below.

My first view of Red Mountain riveted me. It was HUGE. And "red" didn't begin to describe the burnt umber rock or the infinite shadings of shadow and elevation. No other peak I saw in my wanderings of North America, except Denali, had as much personality as this one. It dwarfed everything around it, and weather and watersheds deferred to its sheer mass.

At the summit I pulled over to ask a pretty woman leaning into her backseat being pelted by rain if she was ok. She waved me away. The elevation simply got to her little one, who threw up all over the back seat. By the time I got to Durango I was enervated by the challenge of windy rain-swept roads and the sheer spectacular breadth of mountain scenery.

Blessedly, it was dryer on the west side of the pass. Durango's visitor center was closed, so I pulled off the road near the sun-drenched municipal park. And laughed. Being a person who drives a little red Chevy truck with a kayak in back, I had to feel right at home in a place where the first thing I saw when I paused to call Mama was a really buff guy driving a Ford 4-wheel drive pickup with a blue river kayak in the bed. Perhaps I am not as weird as I thought I was!

Mom reassured me that all was well and teasingly told me to go get the hunk with the pickup and river kayak. I just smiled. Wouldn't have known where to begin at that point. I was married for 13 years and the thought of starting any sort of romance so soon after the divorce started a landslide of conflicting emotions. I decided to wait until I was ready.

I also didn't think I was in his athletic league. The hunk was using a whitewater kayak. I'd resolved to stick to still water-- lakes, marshes, rivers with currents that allow two-way paddles, ponds and coves-- until I was with a group and had received rescue training. But seeing him got me thinking about how much fun it could be to join a kayaking group.

The folks at the local City Market were quite kind. A woman behind me in line shared her Speedway Card discount. Which I appreciated very much, since I'd had to restock on staples. I walked out of the grocery with a renewed spring in my step, munched down some pasta salad, and went in search of a campsite.

The rivers south of Durango delighted me, but I was too tired to kayak this night. It was nearing dark as I drove the access road to Navajo Lake State Park, New Mexico. The trees were gone, replaced by ranches and farms. Roadsides lined by wild sunflowers lured me from the truck, and a biker zooming by laughed at me because I could not resist stopping to photograph them. Such happy things...

Navajo Lake itself was crowded. RVs lined the shores and huge warnings prohibited me from putting the kayak in the water at all, since zebra mussels may have hitched a ride from the Great Lakes aboard its hull. Grumbling, I sat up my tent and found the flush toilets and shower. Much better.

I ate dinner and watched late-arriving neighbors learning how to erect their large, beautiful tent. They were so nice to each other and worked so well together during the process that it made me smile.

Not so the guy in the RV a half block away. He and his friends were having a good time drinking, and the music was awesome. But loud. By 11:30pm I heartily wished him the world's worst hangover! His kids hung out in the open site next

door, huddled over a flashlight telling each other ghost stories. I liked them better. Didn't sleep much that night.

July 26, 2009 Hip New Mexico

~Ponderosa Dreams~

sky cathedrals

varied textured rock and foliage

permutations of brown and green

sap scents

clear water streams

pinecone potentials

mushroom mysteries.

I was up and out in the morning long before the party crew or their children surfaced. Packed in less than ten minutes, I paused at the wilderness camp portion of the lake long enough to watch great blue herons fish for breakfast. There weren't many fish. Not surprising considering the nearly 200 motorboats and RVs on a lake any Midwesterner would consider fairly small. The pits here were smellable at 200 yards, the shoreline litter-strewn. But there were miles of those irrepressibly cheerful sunflowers lining the roads.

I realized I was trying to cover much more ground on this road trip than time, energy and budget allowed, so I looked the atlas over carefully and decided to skip King's Canyon and western Nevada. If I ever return to Vegas, those are within reach via fairly inexpensive day trips. This time out, I wanted to use my time and money for places that are less accessible. And didn't want to have to rush through Alaska or forego cool activities because I hadn't planned correctly. If I didn't stay in hotels at all or eat in restaurants much, I would be able to do many of the things I wanted to.

This particular morning, I thought about outdoor cooking and the nuts and bolts of my chariot. At the Wal-Mart in Farmington, New Mexico, I picked up a mini air-powered jack, some fix-a-flat, and a foldable frying pan. I'd come to this town after hearing a radio spot for an Ansel Adams photography exhibit. But no one was able to tell me where. So I blew through.

Headed for Santa Fe, I encountered enchantment and hippies on highway 126. Off the main highway barely two-lane rutted dirt road deteriorated more with every dude ranch I passed. My truck climb gently into a series of forest-capped mountains speckled with rock formations like none I'd yet seen-- rounded and craggy and sculpted by both wind and water.

It was breathlessly hot. But signs told me these roads are completely impassible in winter due to snowfall. It had rained recently, and I wondered if the truck would make it through the muddy ruts. Logging trucks rumbled by once in awhile, large wheels digging the already rough road into deep muddy tracks. A couple in a sedan stopped when I waved, and reassured me it was possible to get through to Santa Fe without a 4 wheel drive. So I kept right on dodging potholes and soaking in scenery.

I passed a large yellow school bus at an isolated campground without thinking much about it. A short time later, I saw white trash bags lined up neatly along the verge of a stretch of paved road. And then I reached a fork in the road staked out by hitchhiking hippies.

They were younger than me. They were crazy-- who was going to pick them up out here in the back of beyond? And they were so non-threatening that I didn't think twice. I pulled over and asked them where they were going. All the way to Santa Fe, they replied.

They told me they were looking for miracles in the form of rides to and from the city, groceries, and a mechanic to fix the buses' diesel engine. I couldn't help them with the bus, but offered them a lift if they were willing to climb in back. They did. We strapped down their packs, rearranged the food bin and kayak, and set out.

Proceeding at a sedate 50 mph through some of the loveliest mountains and elk range I have ever seen, I navigated switchbacks cautiously. The main highway near Santa Fe was speedier and breezier, and I worried for my precious human cargo. But they looked remarkably cheerful climbing out when we stopped a few blocks from downtown.

I dug out what food I could spare and asked them what they like to be called and how they decided where to go. He "just knew." The stars and dreams guided her. I quietly decided that this is no stranger than the way I was drifting about the country looking for myself. Or the way others made decisions based on love or jobs. Do any of us really know what we are doing? I doubt it.

As we ate lunch, they told me a bit about the friction between older and younger hippie groups. The young man reminded me that hippies are human so politics exist. But everyone gets fed. They've spent a month in the mountains picking up litter. For free. A volunteer ethic endorsed by a sophisticated social network. These two were techies, internet savvy. The young woman was headed for the library to check email. The young man was going to find the mechanic they need to fix their bus. I wished them luck and watched them walk off in different directions.

Santa Fe was an old city long before America was founded. Its grace and culture are alluring, and the city has a laid back sun-drenched mystique and a feeling of wholeness difficult to explain. The young female hippie called it "circle energy." Whatever you call it, it is a clean pretty city. Overpasses and concrete retaining walls are painted in native designs. Walled courtyards and gardens grace the houses. Urban sprawl exists, but manages to avoid being ugly. Even the concrete was decorative, with charmingly painted and patterned freeway under and overpasses.

There was nowhere to park in Santa Fe at midday. After several circuits around the neighborhood without finding a vacant parking place, I headed for the library. A few dollars bought two hours worth of lot time, so I become a library patron. Bought a book of short stories for \$1, browsed the stacks, used the bathroom and enjoy the a/c. Then wondered around the streets watching people, and explored St. Frances of Assisi's grand cathedral, with its lovely garden, sculptures, and shady park with deep green grass.

The Institute of American Indian Arts Museum was featuring artist Daphne Odjig's Retrospective Exhibition. Her vibrant work seemed to flow off the walls. I'm not well educated in art, so this may be unintentional sacrilege, but her work reminded me of Picasso in its use of perspective. However, she used organic, rather than cubist forms. Her work is vibrant, full of life and movement. Mesmerized, I wondered around the gallery for almost an hour, reading about her life, the effect of racial intolerance on her work, and looking at her art. Then I poked my nose in and out of a beautiful terraced restaurant and a few shops. Satisfied with my visit to civilization, I headed back to the truck.

Southbound once more, I was excited. Tomorrow morning I would tackle one of my bucket list activities-- hot air ballooning in Albuquerque! Unfortunately, not doing my homework and planning ahead cost me. All of Albuquerque's hotels are in two areas of the city, both of which are far from the launch zone where I was required to be by 7am. They also have a hefty luxury tax I could not afford to pay

on top of their room rates. The large expressways were congested, and I knew nobody in this city of over 800,000 people.

I had planned on camping, but there wasn't a campground to be found within a 50 mile radius. By the time I'd canvased the neighborhood around the drop zone, it was obvious to me that parking on the street or in a business lot will be dicey. Some areas were too ritzy. Some too rough. I did not wish to be arrested or mugged. This was when I suddenly develop an appreciation for the local mall, which had-- oh joy!-- a Wal-Mart. Security stopped eyeing the truck nervously after about the 5th pass, when an experienced veteran explained to his staff that people often camp in these parking lots.

During my check-in call mom told me that her young tomcat broke into a container of catnip and made himself so high that he spent the day in a stoned snooze. I was still chuckling as we hung up and I stretched across the seat for my own catnap. No such luck. Although the parking lot was large, two cars pulled up close to my truck. A very pretty teenage girl got out of one and hopped into the other. Either my tinted windows prevented them from noticing the truck was occupied or they didn't care. The young guy's sports car rocked for a few minutes as low laughter and sounds of pleasure filtered through the sultry night air. Then the girl got back into her car and they both went their merry separate ways. Sighing, I finally drifted off.

~ River Sippin' Straw ~

Thousands thirsty in ol' Albuquerque

Rio runnin' low,

river sippin' straw

makes great Snake sparse

and grows green onions tall

over in Idaho

where birds once free

disappear

lacking wetland sites to breed

Migration routes

piped underground fore(stall)
showers low pressure
within urban sprawl
from LA up to West Valley City
Wayward wind(mill)
dancing with sun panels
hydro boost
from additive green power
not world drained dry
or cooked by fossil fuels
renewable, clean, wise, sustainable
elk may drink, fowl roost,
sequoia tower
Children bequeathed sails,
not spaceships of fools.



July 27, 2009 Up Up and Away, NM



Because I'd longed for years to try hot air ballooning, I'd never been so glad to be awake at 6am. After a hot, restless night in the truck, a baby wipe sponge bath refreshed me as sunrise burned orange over the Wal-Mart parking lot. Then I fired up the truck and headed for the launch zone.

Two Rainbow Ryders, Inc. (www.rainbowryders.com 505-823-1111) vans pulled up just as I arrived at the suburban Albuquerque launch site. They backed into the open field, unrolled two large tarps to keep the silken balloons clean, then pulled what appeared to be two extremely big sleeping bags into the middle of the tarps. Brilliant lengths of red and yellow unraveled into balloons. Then baskets and burners were pulled out from the vans. Flames flared briefly into the dim light of just-sunup. The burner test. Then big fans started and passengers helped to hold the balloons open until enough hot air was blown in that they stood up by

themselves. In less than a half hour, we climbed into chest-high wicker baskets and lifted off.

The launch zone and the buildings around it fell away, receding as wind blew us south. Eastward we glimpsed purple mountains, westward plateaus drenched in morning sun. Below, the city of Albuquerque unfolded-- a grid of homes and roads and walled neighborhoods stretching as far as we could see. Eric, the balloon pilot, told us this is where the opening scenes for Terminator II were filmed. He patiently answered my barrage of questions about the city and operating the balloon. For an utterly peaceful hour, 7 other passengers and I watched the earth glide by.

Albuquerque by hot air balloon boasts grand views of roads, downtown, various neighborhoods, mountains, plateaus, and the Rio Grande River. The river was near empty in spots. 800,000 people in this city depend on its water, and many of them don't show any signs of caring about conservation. Non-native bluegrass lawns are irrigated and swimming pools filled. Looking at the mansions that had clearly NOT been xeroescaped and the unsustainable growth here I got mad thinking about plans for selling Great Lakes water to this state. No WAY! The inland seas do not exist to fill rich folks swimming pools. Or, to put it more moderately and rationally, perhaps it would be wiser to develop sustainable, ecologically responsible approaches to water use in the west rather than plundering Midwest resources.

Our landing was smooth, despite buildings and fire hydrants and plenty of other things looming skyward that might have tipped or electrocuted or skewered us if the pilot wasn't skillful. The ground crew pulled up in their vans, the pilots helped us disembark from the baskets, and tarps were laid out on the ground. Burners and baskets slid into the rear of cargo vans. The crew rolled the beautiful silk balloons up as tightly as possible, then we passengers helped stuff them back into their bags. In half an hour we were being comfortably conveyed back to the launch site.

A post flight toast was served with an entertaining and informative talk about the history of ballooning-- the first hot air balloon was flown in France, where the locals mistook the roaring contraption descending into their farm fields for a dragon and ran out to meet it brandishing pitchforks. Apparently the champagne toast tradition was born because balloon operators found that farmers didn't mind crushed crops quite so much when they were given good liquor.

The highway beckoned, and by 9am I was headed rapidly south through dusty towns and Gila desert. The local conservation newspaper, New Mexico Wild, spoke of cooperative relationships established between environmentalists, BLM

and parks workers, ranchers, and Washington lawmakers. Without those relationships the desert and the wildlife it shelters fall silently to developers.

New Mexico is called the “Land of Enchantment” for a reason. The wilderness Northwest of Santa Fe possesses a unique, uncanny beauty. The entire state shelters rare and diverse plant and animal species. In the Yeso Hills Research National Area, a fragile ground cover made of lichen and moss and algae and bacteria and fungi retains water and prevents soil from eroding into desert.

New Mexico’s Wilderness Alliance is trying to protect the area from development so that exactly how that micro biotic crust works can be studied. Answers to that question could be applied to many arid, hungry regions of the earth. Including America’s dust bowls. Reading about people who spend their lives fighting to protect and make a living and build strong community in New Mexico’s shrinking wilderness made me think about solidarity and mass movements and my own approaches to relationships in new and humbling ways. I could live more simply and much greener fairly easily if I tried.

Unable to resist the name, I got off the highway at Truth or Consequences. At a Chinese Food place incongruously advertised by a 6-foot carving of Bigfoot holding a fish, the menu was impressive and very continental. I ordered, then slipped away to sponge bathe and change clothes in a bathroom with a flush toilet. Had security been less grouchy, I would have done it at Wal-Mart early this morning. The proprietors of this restaurant wasted no extra words on me, but the food was served quickly and tasted terrific. Cooler, cleaner, much more comfortable, and quite a bit more fragrant, I tucked into the cucumber sauce and veggie curry with gusto.

An older gentleman at another table spotted my kayak. He spoke to me of trips he’d taken-- his sailboat was parked in the lot outside with a for sale sign on it. I looked at the little ketch wistfully. So many islands I would love to go and the boat was small and neat. Just what I would want if I could afford to make a solo voyage.

I listened to his tales with interest, grateful for the congenial company, then rolled down the road to take a peek at a big windy lake buzzing with jet skis at full throttle. My little boat couldn’t compete, so I hit the road once more. By evening, I was a long way south.

July 28, 2009 White Sands, NM

High desert stretched away to some far-distant horizon. Saved from killer temps by elevations 5600 plus feet above sea level, it was still in the mid eighties in Southern New Mexico at 9am. By noon it was 98 degrees and there hadn't been a body of water big enough to boat on in several hundred miles.

I pulled into the Space Museum, grabbed a cold soda, and flipped through posters commemorating planets and astronauts. Walls plastered with original photos, rockets, and space junk souvenirs of all sorts kept me intrigued for half an hour. And I smiled as I read about hot air balloons and dirigibles and spying during the first world war. The entire museum is covered by a gorgeous space mural. Outdoors, 10-foot-agave dwarfed my little red pickup. The landscape made me feel comically small, shrunken and shriveled.

Always a fan of Dr Seuss' messy-headed characters, I fell instantly in love with the palm-like soaptree yucca plants that so resembled them. These plants boast winding, contorted stems that grow fat and lean, tall and short, erect or oddly angled. Some are divided into multiple spiky tops, others three-headed, others symmetrical, some a single tall trunk with no arms and green fronds like a punk haircut. Each seemed to tell a story.

I amused myself for awhile picturing the personalities of these various shaped yucca "trees" animated and in the midst of a lively debate. Discussing the contortions they make, twisting and turning to outmaneuver smothering sands. How old they hoped to become and how many roots they have. What, I wondered, do plants dream? What does plant immortality look like? Offspring that keep their particular characteristics going? Or is there a place, somewhere, where a plant at the top of its majesty simply gets to stay that way? Would these speak of people and critters they've seen, or blink sleepily and talk about far off clouds and rain, wind and insidious sand creep? They seemed to doze in the blaze of midday. Perhaps they awoke at night, when people were gone home.

Expansive White Sands Missile Site sits directly beside the only camping and rec area I'd seen in miles. Somehow these two land uses didn't seem compatible to me. If the Army ran out of other things to use for target practice, would they vaporize hikers? I cynically chose to press on and find a quieter, safer spot to spend the night!

Brightest day was past by the time I reached White Sands National Monument. This gypsum-sand desert unlike any I'd seen before. For one thing, these dunes were fast-moving, swallowing the few plants with the chutzpa to grow in the high, dry conditions.

Signs warned that there was no water available beyond the ranger station. Although the driving tour is less than 15 miles round trip, I wasn't tempted to try walking it. Despite the beautifully solid board walk constructed to take people into the sugary white dunes, this landscape felt alien. Not hostile-- just unforgiving. Not a place to get lost. You might simply disappear beneath a blowing sand mound and never be found.

I wasn't alone in the foreign landscape, though. Several family groups wondered about, and kids couldn't seem to get enough of the sugar white sand. They tore up and down the dunes, which were not hot to the touch even though air temps here can reach 140 degrees. Unlike silicone, gypsum sand doesn't absorb heat.

These dunes differ from other sand dunes in other ways, as well. Most dunes come from erosion-- rock being ground or broken down by water into tiny grains. Gypsum dunes come from crystallization. White Sands lies in 275-square-mile Tularosa Basin's mountain-ringed valley. Rainwater from the mountains surrounding this high plateau collects into shallow lakes called playas. Then here comes the sun, and as the lakes evaporate in intense desert heat, they leave behind crystals of gypsum sand that forms white sugary mounds. These mounds move before the wind, growing and shrinking and forming an entirely new biome in the high Chihuahuan Desert. White sands bury anything not fast enough to move with them or not tough enough to take the hot, dry environment.

It's harsh. Yet there are lizards, grasshoppers, spiders, and birds here. A handful of plant species have also adapted to life on the shifting dunes. Most of them I had never seen before and may not ever see anywhere else. As the setting sun turned white sand lilac and peach, I felt my way carefully down roads swept by the leading edge of sandy creeping mounds. Perched atop a Seuss plant, a raven watched me drive away.

Gypsum dunes long gone, I camped outside a high desert military town near a dusty dun mountain. Exhausted and too overheated to cook, I ate a can of beans and broke open a watermelon. It was far too big for me to eat alone, so I wandered around the campground looking for someone to share with. Almost everyone was holed up inside their air-conditioned RVs. I finally spotted one surrounded by children's toys and knocked tentatively. The family inside was pleased to receive the other half of my watermelon. Was soooo cool to make someone smile! And they had a cute Chihuahua.

The campground specifically had no motorized toy signs posted, so of course some yahoos pulled in at 9pm and spent the night running their ATVs up and down

the mountain. That and he of the loud stereo just made me shake my head. Why go camping if you want to do that stuff? Do a day pass! Then go home and sleep it off and let the rest of the world get some rest, too. Weary weary. Eventually, even the ATVers agreed that it was time to sleep. Without competition from city lights, the moon owned the sky and the stars hung low enough for plucking.

July 29, 2009 Low Desert Melt Down, TX

Today I saw my first roadrunner! Woke to the scent of sage and ponderosa and drove through irrigated rangelands grazed by fat Angus cows. Southern New Mexico at 8600 feet resembled Wisconsin with its pastures and pines. As I drove south, the land gradually turned dryer and more rugged, reddish crags rising above far-flung plateaus.

This was my 13th busy day on the road. If I was going to keep this trip to a month and a few thousand dollars, I needed to spend my time and money carefully. Grumbling to myself about how quickly miles added up, I stopped to eat lunch and get my oil changed at Lykins Tire in Artesia, New Mexico. At \$47.56 this was the slowest and most expensive oil change I had on the entire trip. And I had to remind them to check tire pressure and top off fluids. And watch to make sure they did it. It was hard to reconcile that price tag with sub-par service and the fact that there's an oil refinery right down the street.

My descent into Texas was also quite a shock. I'd come to see Guadalupe National Park, a forested oasis in a state that is flat, huge and HOT. Spectacular wildlife viewing and fall foliage were promoted on the TV special I'd seen. What they did not say is that there is no vehicle access to the park. Wildlife viewing requires hiking away from the road, which I had expressly promised my mom I wouldn't do, and it was the wrong season for fall leaves. Shazbat! Spontaneity wasn't working well this day.

Again, I was struck by the need for planning on future trips. I would have scheduled this differently had I realized how hot the low desert would be, and organized a group for backpacking and camping. The rangers were kind enough to warn me that it was even hotter down at Big Bend, the next stop I'd contemplated. My kayak was melting-- a dent appeared in the keel where it contacted the back of the truck. I freaked.

It was 98 degrees in El Paso, which I was dumb enough to pass through at rush hour. The roads were fast and crowded and there weren't many opportunities to bail. It would have been wiser to get off the freeway in the outlying eastern

suburbs for an early dinner in an air-conditioned restaurant, then coast through after 6:30pm when traffic died down. Live and learn.

I panted my way back to New Mexico. The truck doesn't have a/c, and even though I was dousing myself in sun block, drinking gallons of liquids, and all the windows were open I was dehydrated and irritable. I pulled a bandanna out of my clothes hoard, doused it in water and washed my face and hands. Then I soaked my hair. And put the cool, wet bandanna on my head. Much better. On the road again...

At 7pm, I met a wonderful lady at a little store/deli up the road from Rockhound State Park campground near Deming, New Mexico. The store sells food, tack, a variety of dry goods, and attractive local art. I staggered in to buy cold drinks and a sandwich.

It was after closing time and I'd found my way in through a door that was supposed to be locked. The owner looked more than willing to throw me out, but the kind clerk took pity on my bedraggled hungry self and made me a veggie sandwich with the works from the deli. She, like me, found the desert peaceful and lovely. We talked about grasshoppers. And her smile lit up my day.

My sandwich-making Angel was the one who'd taken many of the photographs that grace the cards the general store sells as souvenirs, she told me with a twinkle after ringing up my purchase. Eating the excellent sandwich at my campsite, I realized belatedly that I'd never asked her name. Well damn. Park brochure in hand, I decided to call and mail order some of her cards. And send her referrals via my website.

For the moment, though, it was pleasurable to simply sit still in the cool night air. I contentedly watched the sun go down, read and wrote. The Gila was stillness, stars, and a milky way stretching into infinity.

July 30, 2009 Mountains, Mines and Caverns, NM

Rugged Rockhound State Park, New Mexico, is home to quail and coyote, wolf, cougar, rattlesnake and dozens of other desert creatures. Here you'll find 30 or 40 different types of rock or enjoy the already hounded and polished variety available for sale at the Red Rock Shop in Deming.

Carlsbad Caverns was blessedly cool. Fellow travelers were entertaining, cave formation and bats interesting. The park rangers took more precautions with tourists here than at Wind Cave. Our guide led the way and a rear guard rounded

up stragglers. An hour and a half tour covered the cave systems' most famous features, but a lifetime wouldn't be long enough to explore this place. Carlsbad is truly immense.

Ranger lore states that Lakota Indians viewed this labyrinth as sacred, and never entered the caves. I wondered if entire societies might be dwelling far underground without our knowledge. Above the miles of subterranean passages, low desert stretches for miles every direction.

The tune "In the Hall of the Mountain King" ran through my mind as we walked, and I thought about the magic of "kissing" stalactites and stalagmites. The rangers were full of information about what cave crickets eat and how different chemicals and water produce various formations. Plastic-eating bacteria live in these caves, and the ranger guiding us speculated about how wonderful it would be to have them in landfills. I agreed, but also wondered idly what would happen should they escape. A world without plastic? Scary thought.

Back on the dusty highway, I had my first encounter with house movers. Modular houses are split in half and loaded onto flatbed trucks, then hauled from place to place. I passed an entire convoy-- at least 5 houses. Fascinated, I watched the big trucks maneuver along 2-lane roads with extra wide loads. Amazing logistical feat.

Passing beautiful southwestern adobe homes, I dreamed of building my own self-sufficient home far off the grid. Solar or wind-powered. Small, low maintenance, cool in summer, cozy in winter, full of light, and built from local materials. Adobe over hay bales, shaded rock patio, agate or translucent cut and polished rock slices in plexi doors and windows. Graceful arched doorways, skylights, curved walls of glass block for the shower surround.

I smiled at my house daydreams-- that sort of security was a long way off. I'd traded my equity for this trip and major debt reduction. Still, I quietly contemplated living in my own little space, perhaps an RV on a few wild acres. It was appealing. But so was a long term loving relationship. I had no great insights into fidelity, duty, reliability or joy. I only knew the road felt good to me.

Roads can be endlessly seductive. I'd studied topographical maps of North America and watched it stretch beneath me as I flew over in a 747. But long distance driving means coming to know the United States as a series of ecosystems, and as a geological wonderland with undeniable presence. From her rocky bones and river blood to her ocean-caressed coasts, America truly is beautiful.

Southwestern New Mexico was weathered-leather tough, with sparse water and great expanses of rolling desert scrub. Navajo Lake, an unexpected jewel tucked between ridges, shouldn't exist at all in this arid spot. The terrain climbs gradually, becoming mountainous again.

Crossing the border into Arizona, I followed winding Route 191 through Apache National Forest. Tall trees crowded narrow roads flanked by steep drop-offs. Clifton took me off guard. Palm trees grew next to arbor vita, and cops lay in wait along two-lane road bordered by a few businesses and houses. Oil wells arms pumped slowly up and down beneath the pitiless sun.

Beyond the tiny town, an immense pit mine burrowed into the mountains. Colored layers of strata extended downward for half a mile. Big equipment lined fenced off edges-- had people and cars been pulled from that abyss? Speed limits were marked often, but I'd already slowed down out of sheer self-preservation.

I never would have guessed mines and mountain sheep would coexist. The sheep didn't seem to mind-- just walked around it. I wondered what the pit and the digging did to people and sheep food supplies. Such compact animals-- solid and muscular. Economical of motion. Seeing them was a gift.

Signs warned motorists to be on the lookout for sheep crossing. I wondered if it snows in Clifton in winter? And how much. Roads climbed fast and turned sharply. With limited visibility, slow heavy equipment, and herds of crossing animals that could be crazy in ice and snow!

It wasn't hard to picture Apache warriors in that rugged mountain desert landscape. Plenty of places to hide and watch the land stretching away below. Vast valleys where battles could be fought and won and lost without anyone on the other side of the range even knowing it.

By now I'd discovered that I prefer elevations above 8000 feet and hills to flatlands. I was also rapidly finding that 14 hour driving days weren't fun, and that extreme heat made it hard for me to eat and depleted my energy. So it was time to modify my route and daily mileage goals. I was Learning Me. Part of what the road trip was for.

The camp hostess at Homolovi Ruins, Arizona, was amazingly hospitable. And they have electrical hookups, so I caught up with email and net friends. Mom spent most of the check in call trying hard to get me to commit to settling down somewhere. I told her if she was so set on Alaska she should move there herself. And that I'd make up my mind AFTER I've seen the other 2/3 of the route I planned to cover. We ended up laughing at each other-- different priorities. My

rootless lifestyle made her nervous. But I'd been firmly grounded by jobs and relationships and houses since I was 17, and now I was determined to take this time to run wild.

The Pits

~ To Date ~

Note to perspective Mr. Right:

Honest plain speaking may get you laid

If you can also be kind

But if we're laying all my faults on the line

Make an appointment-- it may take some time!

Contrary World Views ~

In the world of Glass Half Empty

opportunity is hardship

with a countenance like stellar dust

success a wired trap

gained at others' expense

challenge a pitted path

spotlighting deplorable inadequacy

infernal optimism a bucket of sweetness

poured over sour grapes

there's no accounting for or changing minds or tastes

ponderous practicality plods hand-in-hand

with sad circumstance

know-it-all negativity stands best friends to "I can't"

*discouraged is the most frequent adjective and the only verb
there's no hope for
our riled, vexed, irked, peeved, must-have-it-all insatiable souls
all trails should be approached with cursing and grave caution
for we know not where they'll lead
Life's a fearful frigid wasteland
filled with grim possibilities*

~

*In the world of Glass Half Full
frozen words may catch on fire
and comfort all the world
the sound of the colors of your breath
euphoric, elated, ecstatic
rises through warming air
to please noses with
aromatic ideas
irrepressibly, irreversibly, unjustifiably
Love copes and hope floats
Dreams are gladly grasped for
Folks grow great at
spotting opportunity's open door
and silver linings in dark clouds
appreciating, celebrating
living with less while living more*

~

The choice is yours.

I woke at 7am to Homolovi sunrise, packed, and paused just long enough to eat a granola bar. While chewing, I read about the ancient Anasazi, who paused at Homolovi to farm the rich flood plain of the Little Colorado before continuing their northern migration to Hopi mesas. This is a sacred site for the current-day Hopi, who worship places their ancestors consecrated. Unfortunately, these sights have been invaded and desecrated.

It seems the adobe dwellings built by the Anasazi were disassembled by whites and used as building materials in nearby cities. I cringed, reading of the equivalent of tearing down an ancient, sacred church and using the brick to build a gymnasium. I wondered, unsurprised but still appalled, how much blood will flow before people learn to respect each other's faiths. Another thing to add to my morning prayers.

This was a somber day for me, full of thoughts of genocide and extinction. I believe we do our part in the web of life by learning the habits of the creatures we share the planet with, nurture the environment, and living and letting live. I wondered why tolerance is so difficult for people, and where I fit in in the scheme of things.

My divorce had been final for less than a month. Inevitably, I felt bruised. Wondered what the future held. If I would find someone else. If he would. When. How. If anyone would love my messed up self. If anyone would ever know and understand me well and like me enough to stay. If the love I have in my heart would always fail to satisfy.

The thought of dating still seemed utterly foreign. I was traveling in remote places and not actively looking for love or even a companion. I was working on me. And enjoying the people I met along the way, mostly retired folk, family groups and couples. Just trying to get my heart and battered confidence back on an even keel. The months after I moved out of the house were not easy.

I'd left a full-time job last November to take a travel nurse contract. Then failed the qualifying exam because I was stressed out, hungry, and didn't manage my study time well. I was also trying to move out of my house. Time management and pacing were apparently concepts I couldn't apply to myself. Trying to be Super Woman, I'd failed completely.

Well, I was face to face with my own faults and fears now. And I doubted any of them would surprise my ex. In the hard moments, I was staggered by emotions welled when I spoke of divorce. The hurt, the sadness, the sense of defeat. The disappointment of the relationship I thought would last forever just not working. The knowledge that friendship might not even be possible. How very empty that felt, after the times we'd had nothing in the world BUT each others backs and made it through.

I struggled with the idea of belonging. The vast majority of my friends and family loved us both well. We separated quietly and refuse to sacrifice everything we've worked for in a legal battle. But there was blame and pain. The last time I saw my ex, he told me the divorce was ruining his life. I looked at him and wondered if he ever loved me, or just the idea of an adoring wife and helpmate. I didn't point out that the divorce wasn't enhancing my life, either. It was just better than being trapped in a relationship that hadn't been good for a long while and seemed to be going nowhere indefinitely.

At this point, I was viewing men with a jaundiced eye. I'd grown very wary of need and obligation. Why have someone in your life if neither you nor they enjoy it? I wanted to be independent without hate or militancy.

If I was ever to have another "romantic" relationship, I wanted it all. A passionate lover I could have meaningful give and take conversations, comfortable silences, and fun with. A friendship that would endure through inevitable ups and downs. A man strong enough to believe in himself, me and us. Someone considerate who would listen to and be real with me so we both understood what was going on. Someone who I could accept and be accepted by without judgment or abandonment. I dreamed of a loving physical and emotional connection with a welcoming, patient man willing to spend the time on a relationship. Someone honest, kind, clear on what they wanted, appreciative and verbally and physically affectionate. I wasn't holding my breath.

I regretted hurt felt and caused in past relationships, and wondered if my siggys ever loved me as a person. Not in a way that could weather reality, apparently. Perhaps they loved an ideal I could never be or only loved me when I was happy and supportive and loving. Or loved how I made them feel about themselves by believing in them. Or loved the physical relationship. I don't think my siggys understood or loved me the fallible, uncertain human being. Not often enough that I believed it, anyway.

I was newly single in my mid thirties, trying to reconcile the things that brought me joy with how I'd been living my life. There was a gap I was having a hard time

bridging. Far too wild to be happy in the city even though I'd lived there all my life up to this point, I lacked skills those raised on the land take for granted-- hunting, fishing, foraging, canning. Some of them I was not eager to acquire.

I'd rather take a picture of most critters than eat them. This trip, with its moments of hunger, had not changed that. That, at least, was something about myself I could count on. Given the choice, I always preferred peanut butter, cheese or eggs over meat. If you waved a cooked hot dog or turkey leg under my nose, I'd eat it. Yet another character defect-- the compromised vegetarian ideal. Sighing, I acknowledged my own inconsistencies and imperfections. The thinking I was doing as I traveled was the first step toward knowing and accepting myself, a step toward healing and growing and learning. A step away from grief. But at this point I was still in deep.

In addition to my emotional baggage from my failed marriage, in the months after my divorce I'd had feelings for someone who did not requite them. Love had been a little bit hard on me of late. So I turned up the radio, played those songs that made me laugh and cry. Sang as I traveled, voicing emotions I'd kept buried for a long time.

Music brought release and clarity. One song even offered comfort-- "You don't have to be his girl. You don't have to be my girl. Be your own girl." Being my own girl had cost me the security of a comfortable house in the suburbs and a good, smart man who works hard. I was alone with uncertainty and loneliness. But it was an opportunity-- a new way of looking at myself. Who was I now and what did I want to do with my life?

Feeling free was daunting and exhilarating. I was unwilling to return to a lifestyle that didn't satisfy my need to breathe and stretch and grow, but unsure what my alternatives were. I had considered jumping into a new relationship. Now I paused and wondered if that was what I really wanted.

I had been lonely in marriage and, even though we'd lived together for 13 years, I felt my husband and I were never fully with each other. Pursuing our own careers and hobbies, maintaining our friendships, so few shared passions or activities. Unable to give each other the warmth or support needed. Arguments avoided or conflicts escalated that never should have been. Anger and disillusionment rather than understanding. Talking reluctantly, and far too seldom of anything that meant anything. Seeing the best and worst of each other. It made me want to scream that the one thing we seemed to have in common, after divorce, was the abandonment we both felt.

Would it be different with someone else? Or were there things about myself I needed to know and work on so that the communication and closeness in future relationships would be better? I sighed. There were. So the question became, how and what do I change? I was a mess, but messy in the way that spring cleaning makes a house before it is reassembled into better order.

Fantastic

inspired by Tom Petty "Refugee"

~Gamblers, Adventurers & Vagabonds ~

My love for you winds

through a maze of dreams

Greets attempts to escape,

justify, explore cautiously

with mockery

Love cares nothing for queries

of worthiness or feasibility

You are the road I drive

the fabric of my life

I a refugee insufficiently fleet

heart lost to enchantment

in your casual game of chance.

~ Crossroads ~

In my sweet dreams you're standing right beside me

we are exactly where we want to be

there is no peak we can't reach as one

and no regret for things unsaid or done

So tell me, can we dream together?

I'm tired of dreaming all alone

I love you and always want what's best for you

kiss me hello, let's step into tomorrow

kiss me hello or tell me to let go.

Married for over a decade, it still felt very strange to contemplate being with anyone else. My trip goals didn't include romance. By the time I'd driven the 400-900 miles daily, eaten, found a campsite, kayaked, and seen a park I was usually plum tuckered out. And yet my body had its own ideas. And my mind had time to wonder as I drove.

Trying on new roles in my mind, I searched as safely as I could devise through many potentials to figure out what I would enjoy. And why. My feelings stopped eluding me, as I listened more carefully and stopped worrying about comparing them to other peoples'. It became guilt-free to have an opinion, a preference, and an agenda that were my own. And I rediscovered how freeing it was to simply be me, even if it was sometimes lonely.

Sometimes I tried to imagine who Mr. Right might be. There were cowboys and farmers and construction workers and park rangers about, and I looked at them curiously, trying to figure out how they lived, how well they took care of themselves and their families. If such lifestyles would work for me.

The old Eagles tune "Victim of Love" played through my mind. "What kind of love have you got?" I'd asked myself that question at various times in my life. When my ex and I were married, we had a love that shined. By the time we separated, that love seemed all about mutual pain. And asking for anything other than what we could come up with together giving all we had seemed complete disloyalty.

But we'd severed the marriage tie, and I allowed myself to fantasize. To dream about what I would do and who I would be if I could be anything. And alone for the rest of my life wasn't part of that dream. So I let my mind paint imaginary scenarios. Ones in which music and writing were part of my daily life, and my ideal mate and I found creative inspiration together. Ones in which laughter and fun and passion and practicality found a way to coexist peacefully. And ones in which arguments were not deal breakers-- love survived.

Occasionally I daydreamed of sensual company-- spikes of sultry possibility that amused more than aroused me. The Gillette biker was on a machine worth more

than me, if not is your criteria. He looked confident and polished and as out of reach as a movie dream. Short of running these guys over, I wondered how a girl in a truck goes about picking up a biker, even in fantasies.

I wasn't a biker chick. I owned a bike at one point, but my loved ones hated and feared it so much I felt horribly guilty riding. Getting divorced forced me to re-examine my desire to please, to do what others wanted or expected of me. It made me see how my own fears made me dependent, how relationships where people limit and hide behind each other rather than explore possibilities and find ways to attain dreams wisely could be truly smothering. How the need for stability and the fear of change effect the ways we deal with each other and live our lives.

I wasn't afraid to initiate. But I also wasn't exactly the forward type. I jokingly contemplated driving around in a bikini. With my luck, I'd pick up Utah State Troopers and be arrested for indecency. By this time, I was laughing myself silly.

I allowed my imagination free reign, thinking about a biker I'd seen several times on the road. Or perhaps several who had similar taste. Dark helmet, blonde ponytail, black leather jacket over well-filled jeans sitting easily on a sleek bike. Many of the bikers I'd seeing crossing the country were seasoned riders, iron horse cowboys who looked as complete on their machines as a good horseman looks on a mount he's trained and worked years with. The one I had in mind I'd seen on a lonely stretch of road winding through switchbacks and dusty valleys south of Dinosaur National Monument. He rode expertly.

Helmets and gear can be tantalizing-- all you know for sure is body type. The solidity of him was appealing. I watched him idly as we wound out way into the mountains-- he was visible a half mile ahead of me. Most bikes are faster than my S10 pickup on straight-aways, but he'd stopped to look at the view from an overlook, so I watched him through the rearview for a few hundred miles. Then turned a sharp corner into open range and nearly ran into a cow. Aww hell. If my telepathy was working, the biker wouldn't have the same problem. But he might not be paying attention to his driving, either!

I paused at a fork in the road to consult a map and watched, relieved, as "my" biker pulled into the gas station across the highway. He hadn't hit the cow. The gas station was attached to a SUBWAY. I followed the masked biker toward the restaurant, wondering what I would find once he'd removed the dark visor and helmet.

Anticipation had my pulse picking up. He was tall and buff. Leather jacket and jeans cradled muscles beautifully formed. He stretched, leisurely showing off after

the long dusty miles. Then he took the helmet off, shook his blonde hair out, and smiled. My heart turned over like a well-tuned alternator.

I managed not to stare or walk into the glass door as my dream hottie held it open. The blast of cool a/c revived me, pulling me up from the flames of lust I'd abruptly been engulfed by. I looked at his ring finger. Empty. The wattage in the smile I turned on him with my thanks made him blink. He watched me head for the drink cooler, and I was abruptly aware of the extra sway in my walk.

Bon Jovi "You Give love A Bad Name" blasted from the radio overhead, and I tried hard not to laugh as a leather-clad arm held open the cooler door. We paid and found a table in the restaurant area. Subway subs hit the spot, and his long legs were sprawled out beneath my table in short order.

I asked him where he was headed and if anyone was waiting for him. He talked of roads he'd been down and wouldn't drive again. Of places he'd never been and planned to go. And of the poetry of stars above the nighttime desert.

I didn't have to explain to him the lure of sunlight on wide plateaus, the magic of shadowed arroyos. We loitered outside, soaked in the drowsy heat. He climbed back on the sleek bike, kicked the engine into purring life. And invited me for a ride. The helmet slid over my hair and settled on my shoulders. And I laughed as we flew down the road.

"How far would you like to go?" he asked with only a slight smirk.

"I'll let you know," I replied, straight-faced, while my mind impishly removed his clothes. The bike seat was comfortable, leather worn soft by weather and use. I watched his hands on the throttle and wondered how they would feel sliding across my skin. His attention didn't falter as I moved closer, wrapping my arms around his waist and leaning against his broad back.

Panoramic miles unrolled and the sun sank lower. Painted desert cycled through delicate shades of lavender, ivory, pink and purple. Strange rock formations loomed around us, enlarged and highlighted by strong slanting light. When twilight silhouetted birds atop the cactus and orange sunset glow outlined the buttes, he stopped. We ate travel food from the saddlebags, watching the sun set in companionable silence.

The bike rumbled contentedly back over road we discovered earlier. Intoxicated by speed, wind and the heat of him and baked to a state of contentment by the desert furnace, I was ready to melt. Bright white stars popped out like stellar fireflies above us and I impulsively asked him what he thought of camping out. He had laugh lines around his eyes, and dimples flashed at me over his shoulder.

We whipped back around corners in a rush of dark wind. I savored the scent of sage and the distant floating howl of coyotes as we rode the 30 miles back to the gas station and my truck. The moon rose slowly.

These backcountry roads were quiet, far from truck convoy routes and interstate jams. The gas station was closed when we rolled up. I dismounted and took the helmet off. My biker switched the engine off and unwound from his seat.

He hung the helmet on the bike, then picked my hand up. Kissed my open palm, then raised my wrist to his warm mouth. My breath caught, eyes closing in pleasure as he traced my pulse with his tongue. His arms felt right as he drew me close. His lips on mine were a prayer answered. Opened and explored as thoroughly as land about to be settled, I welcomed him.

The air between our bodies heated and disappeared, the last sliver of moonlight snuffed as curves melded into hard muscle. My fingers sifted through the silk of his thick hair and smoothed beneath layers of jacket and T shirt. His skin burned.

“This is where you get off,” he teased quietly, moving his mouth out of reach.

“Just me?” I retorted, curling my fingers casually into his front jeans pocket. I reached up to lay my lips against his salty neck, nibbling. He inhaled sharply, then chuckled.

“Come on.” His tug on my hand was gentle, and I followed him into the moonlit street of tiny downtown without hesitation. A sleepy motel halfway up deserted main street welcomed us onto its wide shadowy porch. We walked through the faded painted doorway and found the proprietor with his legs propped up on the counter.

“Working late?” my hottie asked easily.

“Saw ya coming,” our host replied. “Not too much going on out here at night. Nothing much back the way you were headed. Figured you’d end up here if you didn’t camp.” The room was paid for quickly, keys exchanged. “Y’all have a good night.”

I was nervous suddenly. Perhaps watching money exchanged brought me back to reality from the sensual haze I’d spent the day in.

My iron horse cowboy smiled at me, picking up the guitar sitting in the corner of the lobby. He plucked the strings experimentally, found it in tune, and grinned mischievously at the manager. Then his outrageous twang filled the room, song as borrowed as the guitar. “Out in a West Texas town named El Paso, I fell in love with a beautiful girl...” I couldn’t quite picture this man dying tragically in the

arms of the woman he cannot forget, so wasn't surprised when he switched to a cocky Skinnard song, "What's your name, little girl? What's your name?"

The manager guffawed. "Y'all take than on up to the room with you and bring it back in the morning. My Lady will be lookin for me and I don't need no singin' cowboys cluttering up my lobby."

My Karaoke King sang and strummed his way up the steps to our room on the second floor landing. A few curious guests stuck their heads out to figure out what the ruckus was all about, then retreated smiling. I unlocked the room door and stepped through.

He sprawled in a chair with the guitar while I investigated the room. Clean and small, it had a carved wood bed frame and southwestern art on the adobe and peeled bark walls. There was a solidity to the construction that I found intensely appealing, as though it is built to withstand an age of sun and wind.

The windowsills were thick, screens allowing in cool evening air. A small veranda overlooked a tiled courtyard with a cactus garden and a cistern. Room light reflected off clear dark softly wind-ruffled water, gleaming softly. A hunting cat glided into the shadows opposite our room, disappearing beneath an arch into the desert scrub beyond.

The small attached bath was immaculate. I was not. Opening the taps, I rinsed my face in clear water as I filled the tub. Bright moonlight bathed the small room, so I didn't turn on the overhead glare. There was no bubble bath, but the complimentary shampoo lathered nicely. I skimmed out of my T-shirt and jeans, listening to the soft sound of Spanish guitar.

My hair fanned out on the surface, then laid sleekly after lathering and rinsing. By the time my hottie joined me, the water was cool on my skin. He dropped his jeans unselfconsciously and slid beneath. The planes and hollows of his body gleamed wetly in soft moonlight. He was dappled, shadowed eyes and brilliant smile.

I reached for the shampoo and smoothed it through his hair while his hands explored my curves. Our bodies flowed together as rivulets of water sloshed over the tub rim to slide across tile floor. We drank each other, supped upon night. Heat and purple dark were the only realities until the first bright streak of light cracked the horizon. My eyes had not closed but I dreamed. And he wove his own fantasies into the bright fabric of my dreaming until we lay side by side replete, complete.

He didn't make me say goodbye. In the glare of desert 10am, I heard the bike kick to life and hit the highway. I mopped up our cascade of water from last night with

a smile on my face. Tied the condom bag shut discreetly. I'm too practical a dreamer to want either of us to have to worry about roaring cases of VD, but there was no morning hangover of distaste. No apprehensive regret. No danger. Only a sweet memory of time enjoyed.

I blinked, back in the reality of arid afternoon landscape. And laughed quietly at the little mental dramas my hormones create. As I turned left at a T intersection, I watched the helmeted biker scoot into the gas station across the highway.

The man I'd been having sultry daydreams about could have been 20 years younger or 60 years older than me. No way to tell under a full black helmet and visor. Or he could have been someone I know and don't like. I was content to head to my destination none the wiser. One day I knew the time would be right for me to make another foray into love land. But this time, I would be taking a leisurely route, a compass and a map!

July 30, 2009 Dinosaur National Monument, Utah

The hike up arid, scrubby mountain to view cliff paintings was worth it. Could that long-gone artist picture people viewing the painting thousands of years later? Why did the artist choose a lizard? Simply to celebrate and delight in an enjoyable critter? Did lizards have spiritual significance? Their resilience is certainly inspiring-- they manage to survive incredible temperature extremes and find enough food in barren places. Or had the artist made something pretty for the sheer pleasure of creating?

This road trip was the first time in my life I had planned and done something simply because I knew I would enjoy it. I play music for the same reason, but it has always been a guilty pleasure done on stolen time. As I gazed at this cliff painting, I wondered how the artist found the leisure time to create such a thing. Hunting and gathering lifestyles are time-consuming and exhausting. Was the artist a farmer? In any case, if they could do it, why couldn't I?

All of my friends at the time were ladder climbers working full time or more. For the first time in my life, I began to seriously believe in the possibility of simplifying my life enough so I could work part time and write or make music regularly. Perhaps even for a living eventually. Or, if I couldn't manage that, of finding an occupation that melds well with the things in life that bring me joy. Combining passions. Boating and writing, for example. I giggled at the vivid fantasy of a beloved with a fishing pole and I quietly drifting on a sunlit lake as my words fill pages.

In dreams, of course, my lover supports my creative ambitions and ideas and waves do not swamp the vessel or soak writing or research materials. The reality would require a rowboat, at the very least. And more cooperation from the weather than I usually receive. Or a yacht and a laptop. Or just myself, a legal pad and a pen, and some pauses in the kayak action.

I was smiling as I picked my way back down the steep switchbacks, passing a dad and his very determined pint-sized independent Miss on their way up. He was logically explaining to her why she didn't want to eat whatever she had just picked off the ground. I wonder if men have any idea how adorable they are when they are being warm and loving? Family men rock. They are off limits and sometimes so wonderful that loving them is safe and not painful for me.

I examined that thought, a bit surprised by it. Apparently my subconscious had been working on relationships-- what I liked and disliked, remembered fondly, regretted, hoped for. I didn't want children of my own. But I prefer older men, and many of them come with. So how did I feel about ready-made families? I wasn't sure.

I wasn't looking for a father figure-- just someone who understands that he can show love without being weak. Men seem to do this much better with children than with women. After all the bluster and actual abuse I'd seen as a nurse and just through daily living, watching men do well in the family settings was healing for me. And inspiring. There must be a way to bring out that gentle side at other times without compromising their pride. I filed the thought away for future exploration. At this point, I was saving my energy for traveling.

On the lava fields in Idaho, a Native American father was explaining something to his son, serious faces tilted toward each other as they discuss the terrain. It struck me forcibly how beautiful both men were in this fatherhood role, how adorable the children, and how very similar the situations were despite cultural differences. It was one of the more indelible snapshot impressions that stayed with me throughout my journey.

The driving tour at Dinosaur was accompanied by a beautifully crafted informational booklet. Fifty cents bought the motor tour guide, which I returned to the box upon completion.

When I saw a rafting expedition putting in at the dock, I approached looking for info about the river up and downstream. A woman passenger told me brusquely that this was a private party. I pointed to the kayak in the back of my truck and patiently explained I only wanted to ask the pilot a few questions if he could spare

me a moment. He answered my queries, but also cautioned me about hefty fines for trespassing. River use was by permit only.

I dislike the concept of water rights intensely. OWN water? But in the western United States water is a valuable, scarce resource. People have fought and died over access rights ever since Europeans came to the USA. I reminded my disgruntled self that there are private lakes in the Midwest, as well. And people who live on them pay a premium to do so and are entitled to their privacy.

It was also about safety-- in such sparsely populated areas knowing where boaters and hikers are could be a survival necessity if there's an emergency. So I respected the rule, if grudgingly. Climbing grumpily back into the truck, I drove 5 miles back to the visitor's center, where the river pilot assured me I could buy a boating permit.

Requesting a boating permit from the ranger at the visitor's center only netted me more frustration. It was late in the day. Advanced reservations were required, since permits weren't issued at this location. NOT what I wanted to hear. But the ranger was so obviously dismayed not to be able to accommodate that I smiled and reassured her I'd find another place.

In the visitor center, I explored towering plant-eating dinosaur leg bones and ogled humongous fossilized teeth. Reluctantly climbing back into my fiery truck, I hit the road. Which ran beside the cold, inviting Green River I could not legally boat or swim on. My foul mood wasn't improved by barbed wire and no trespassing signs separating me from every river access point in the nearby town. I cheered up, though, when I spotted a couple kids giggling and bouncing on their backyard trampoline. Their border collie barked joyfully as he bounced right along with them.

July 31- August 3, 2009 Four Corners

I have crossed cultures and religions-- many of which are completely foreign to me. They have caused me to re-examine my own faith and viewpoint, to see both the weaknesses and strengths of my moral stances and world view. I have learned much about attraction, sophistication, experience, and the ways in which people can love or hurt/disrespect each other-- intentionally or unintentionally.

~ Relatives ~

I do not regret

*never seeking to find
my whys
in bourne child eyes
Unfettered love
free flies
bountiful
not rationable
Earth's only
unlimited resource
We all belong
to each other.*

~ Evolving ~

*Hereditary pieces of Eve,
Every women of knowledge
Sees many things
Multiple sides
Standing
In work shoes or stiletto boots
Sun and wind and rain
She remains
Mother of the Human family
who Adam did not leave
Alone after Eden
even in pain and uncertainty
Because there was need
for each to succeed*

*and for caring
Adam and Eve
existed mutually
courageously
refusing to live life
Hiding
Building new dreams
When hoped-for Eden
Could not be achieved
They were not the Only
Beings
Every culture has stories
Of love, creation and heaven
And each must define
Sustain their own belief
Without disdain. Without shame.
Without breaking
their (olive) branch
or the trunk
of the family tree
Peace.*

I buy a gas can, fill it, and begin carrying 3 gallons of water in addition to the Gatorade and juice. The desert is not forgiving. Even though I have done the routine maintenance on the truck and have AAA and everything I can think of that I might need in an emergency, I have no desire to be stranded. The cell phone reception is spotty-- none available in many parts of the mountains or deserts.

I'm winding my way through a high, dry exposed Coral Reef that has fossilized. As magical as this landscape is undersea, in the gray light of twilight and dry air it gives me the creeps. Luna Mesa is even worse-- so bleak I shiver and long for anything living and green. It's a long four hours of solitary driving, one of the few stretches of road I do not enjoy.

I gas up at a lonely pump so far from anything civilized that I am devoutly grateful it's automated pay at the pump. It feels like zombie country-- as though there's something hostile and predatory waiting for me. The RV park a few miles further on is ghostly grey in the fading light, and completely barren of life. The managers likely live on the irrigated patch of land across the highway, but I can't bring myself to stay the night on this concrete and dust desolation. I drive into the night, finally stopping long after my body has worn down.

Bigfoot

Mining

gypsum sand vs. grand sand dunes burning silica

High vs. low desert

Sun oil wind water energy

Screeched through Arizona headed for Grand Canyon north rim and the series of parks that leads on up to Yellowstone, then over to Spokane and up to BC and Alaska. I was looking forward to the ferry ride down the west coast simply because someone else would be driving! The route back to mom's home in Michigan would be a lot quicker-- dipping into Wyoming for Glacier but then straight shot east. I planned to drive over the top of Lake Superior, timing it so I see upper Michigan and Pictured Rocks in daylight.

Utah

Elk at Gunnison

Zion shuttles

Shuttles and ranger-led hikes and talks, excellent intro films,

Self-guided learning such as the wonderful microscope and mounted plant samples at Canyonlands Visitor's center, Powell ranger talk, incredibly diverse rock formations

Recycling bins at parks

Coral Pink Sand Dunes UT-- showers, ATVs and AK 47s

Cave discoverer stories

Gunnison-- contrasting methods of canyon formation, canyon exploration, cooperative approaches to use and protection,

Grand Canyon spiritual home-- a natural cathedral, much like a sacred grove

Arches-- independent ladies

Bryce Canyon-- the ideal driving loop tour with picnic and hiking spots

Capitol Reef-- see the ocean floor without water

Every park is worth visiting-- each has its own unique magic and wild wonders

Quail Creek and the Sevier River outside Bryce Canyon were pretty

Zion-- bloody history of religious persecution and persecuting not spotlighted. As with other sacred places, the focus here is on achievement and beauty. The park is an outdoor cathedral.

Arches

I am not tempted to settle in Utah, despite its beauty. It does not seem like the place for liberal nonconformists.

Coral Pink Sand Dunes State Park, Kanab, Utah -- balanced uses--recreation and conservation

Canyonlands, Utah Island In The Sky, The Needles...awesome visitor center and ranger talks RE exploration CO river

Sand Hollow Reservoir outside Hurricane, UT

Bryce too civilized for my taste-- every amenity imaginable

Bryce Canyon-- Ideal for biker jaunts or picnics

Capitol Reef, UT

Size of Navajo, Mojave lakes

The sparkle of clean water underneath unobstructed sky was startling, since desert stretched endlessly away in all directions. I'd entered reservoir country.

Hurricane, UT offered a public laundry directly off the main drag. After throwing in several loads, I scooted down to the grocery store a mile away to restock on

staples-- juice, Gatorade, granola bars. I had no refrigeration or cooler, so was missing dairy. Had been snacking on cheese sticks from gas stations, but there had been none to be found in the last day or so.

I caved in at the deli and bought chicken salad with mayo. It was hotter than a solar flare, and my intestines sent the mayo back. Paid for my gluttonous idiocy by spending as much time in the rest room as I spent folding laundry. But at least the clothes were clean and I had bought enough to eat for the next week. Someone at Grand Canyon raved about beach camping off the road headed toward Saint George. That sounded quite wonderful after all the dry, dusty miles I'd driven.

Sand hollow Reservoir beach camping, near Hurricane, NM

As it turned out, the beach was wonderful. A passable dirt road lead back several miles from the highway, so there was no road noise. Polite State Park rangers gave good directions. RVs were parked separately from tent campers, and people spread out enough that some illusion of privacy existed despite the way sound carries in the desert. I parked as close to the lake as soft sand allowed without me getting the truck stuck. Far enough from the port a pot that I wouldn't have to listen to everyone else visiting it all night but close enough that I could get there in a hurry if I needed to. Fortunately, my upset stomach was done for the night. I watched the moon rise, listened to coyotes howling, and slept soundly.

The lake called just after dawn. I portaged the kayak a few hundred yards and slid into water so clear that trees 40 feet down were perfectly visible. Kicking myself for not bringing my snorkel, I paddled around watching fish and looking at algae, water weed, and shore plants. I pulled the boat out in a quiet spot, swam lazily for awhile, ate a container of applesauce and drank a juice. Tried to stay out of the way of anglers. Peaked at birds hiding out in bits of marsh. Everything was shy-- hunting must be allowed. Animals in protected areas usually didn't view me as a predator. Outside the National Parks, though, it was hard to get within 100 yards of anything, no matter how silently I drifted. I supposed, wryly, that if I were worried about becoming dinner, I would be skittish, too.

Colorado National Monument

Colorado National Monument-- lady cyclist, silence, peace, cool breeze

The Red Rock Road and highway through Colorado National Monument are truly lovely and ideal for bicycles. Challenging, though! Steep and quite the change in altitude. A joyride compared to Estes!

7/30

Portly prairie dogs use the raised highway as the highest lookout point and aren't quick enough to get out of the way of speeding vehicles

Green River permit req'd for boating

Red Roof Rock Shop Deming, NM

No-kill shelter in UT

Grand Junction-- Ute and Colorado Rivers

By the time I reach Colorado National Monument, I'm burned out on geology. Or so I think. River access costs money, and is by permit through a gated city park. I pass. And pause on my way into the Monument to ask a ranger what makes it different from Bryce, Arches, Grand and Canyonlands. She tells me that one man spent his entire lifetime working to get and keep it protected and that there are more varied formations and wide vistas than the other parks possess. Dubious, I pay the fee and drive up the switchbacks. And find, within the first 2 or three expansive curves, that the ranger was absolutely right. The views here are incomparable. Sun shines down. And, once I stop the truck and kill the engine, there is absolute peace. I slow down, stretching the short road tour out for the sheer joy of it. White banded rock contrasts beautifully with desert browns and reds. Serenity descends. And, once I exit the monument, I wind through beautifully landscaped green suburbs of Grand Junction. A lovely lovely detour well worth making. A gardener's delight.

August 4, 2009 Colorado

Colorado was celebrating Smokey the bear's birthday, and a sarcastic state ranger pulled up on a golf cart to tell me I should've read the "free day pass" sign before sopping to drop money in the registration box at the entrance to the campground. I told him I intended to camp. The sign clearly stated that overnight campers must still pay. He drove off in a huff. Then returned 10 minutes later to grouchily warn me to move my truck off grass seeded on my campsite. I looked at sparse shoots of green spread over gravel and tried hard not to laugh as I move the truck to the spot he impatiently indicated. Back in Wisconsin what he called "lawn" we call "crabgrass." But these were the first showers I've seen in 3 days and I didn't want to get evicted for being a wiseass. I bit my tongue.

Satisfied that his authority had been exerted and complied with, the campground cop drove his golf cart toward the sunset. Shortly thereafter, the camp hosts

pulled up. As mellow as the cop was uptight, their welcome made me laugh. Even the pretty dog riding the seat between them seemed to smile. They asked if I needed anything, took care of their administrative duties, and waved as they headed back to their campsite.

Half hour later, I had my first encounter with water regulation, when I discovered that the shower must be fed quarters. 4 for 2 minutes. Returning to the truck, I ransacked it and came up with 2 dollars in change. This had better be a quick shower, then. Standing in one of two shower stalls all lathered up, I swore under my breath because it wasn't working. Then the bathroom door opened and someone came to occupy the only remaining stall.

I waited. The girl next door took her time. After she'd dropped in 4 sets of quarters, the water finally shut off. I listened to her rustle around and leave the stall next door. Then it was quiet, and I thought she'd gone. Wrapped in a towel and dripping soap, I stepped out of my nonfunctional shower and scooted into the one next door. The girl from next door was standing in front of the mirror doing her perfect blonde hair.

Bedraggled and dripping grimy suds, I looked apologetic and observed, "At least this one works." Then I popped in my remaining quarters and scrubbed like mad. I imagine that girl went back to her group campsite with stories about the crazy madwoman she ran into in the loo.

I was finishing dinner from a can when a group of five guys went by on bikes. Some of them look familiar, and I tried mentally matching faces to pictures I might have only seen online. I was uncertain, and opted not to say anything beyond a casually returned greeting. They kept going, a relief. I was tired, and only wanted to make music.

I'd chosen a site far from everyone else, which I now wasn't so happy about. Felt a bit exposed and vulnerable. But at least I didn't feel guilty about playing the mandolin for ½ hour. There was no one around to disturb.

By the time I'd noodled through it a few times, I was pleased with my arrangement of String of Pearls. Not bad for a wild crazy woman ;.P I put the mandolin back in the truck, picked up my hefty, heavy duty utility flashlight, and went down to the beach for a walk.

I'd had a conversation awhile back with a lovely young woman who'd been mugged outside a city bar and robbed of her purse. I looked at her and thought that she was lucky the guys were only thinking about a fix, because she's gorgeous. She told me that her male relatives said she shouldn't have been there in the first

place. And, thinking about a young, vibrant woman who was being blamed for other people's violent tendencies and conditioned to stay fearfully at home, I got mad.

That young woman looked shocked as I explained how to use car doors, horns, and her vehicle as a whole for self-defense. She looked even more shocked when I explained how to poke and clobber with a utility flashlight. But by the time I got done with explanation, what she did NOT look was helpless. How many men who claim to care for his daughter/wife/sister/girlfriend fail to teach her rudimentary self-defense is beyond me. Loving a woman means empowering her, rather than encouraging her to be dependent, helpless, and afraid.

I thought about her and rapes I'd heard and read about as I picked up the heavy utility flashlight and headed for the beach. I also thought about the way people behave in groups and the need for alertness. And living fully despite the ugliness in the world.

It was still light and there were other people around. I avoided the guys scattered over a quarter mile of waterfront, scoped my kayak route for the next morning, moved the tent so I could jump quickly from it to the truck, put the flashlight and mace within reach, and settled in to read. By ten it was dark and I was long asleep.

August 5, 2009 Colorado to Wyoming

Woke this morning to the calls of birds that looked like mourning doves and sounded like crows. Groups of them congregated, arguing above the tent. Then the construction noise started. Not sure what they were building, but the backhoe surely meant business! I kayaked on the reservoir, but it was so heavily fished and frequented by motorboats that there wasn't much of interest to see. One great blue heron and a catfish jumping.



Camped off Route 191 in Flamingo Gorge National Recreation Area, Wyoming. Wasn't sure if the spot I'd chosen was legal, but there are RVs scattered about at ¼ mile intervals. The only other campgrounds I'd found were full or right next to the road. The silence far down a rutted dirt, heavily forested road was pine-scented, deep and sweet. There were elk, and probably also mountain lions. That should have frightened me more than it did.

I'd spent a good part of the day on a trucking route through the mountains, impressed by how truckers coped with the grades and RVs and SUVs zooming impatiently past, tailgating, and cutting them off. Amazingly skilled, some of those big rig drivers.

Stopped to stretch at a pull off perched atop a mountain and looked the long meadow down to a far off horizon. In the middle of dried wind-tousled grasses stood a beautiful American flag. Touched deeply, I stared for awhile at the proud symbol of our country, framed by golden grass and soft background of far purple hills. Militantly vocal, uncompromisingly opinionated and staunchly conservative,

some parts of the west didn't suit me at all. But their patriotism and support for soldiers did. Never had I seen so many flags flown, so many veterans memorials lovingly maintained.

I fall asleep in a somewhat stuffy tent beneath the stars' gleam, awakening around 2-3am freezing to crawl into the sleeping bag and go back to sleep. Last night I dreamed of a man I haven't seen in a long time telling someone I was [going to be] his wife. I have no desire to remarry so not sure where that came from! I want my own life and well being independent of another. Perhaps my body was reminding me that I am a physical, as well as spiritual creature. But, simply put, God and nature are healing. My dealings with men hurt me. And they didn't seem to bring the guys much joy, either.

There were few people here and fewer roads. Hot full day and long stretches of lonely highway roll by. I'd heard coyotes in the desert several nights, and was glad to be near other people. Tonight was much more isolated. Hoped that wasn't a mistake.

The packed-dirt access road could be done easily on an ATV, comfortably on a motorcycle. The thought spooked me a little. Wondered, seeing the 5-guy posse last night at the campground, if men always run in packs. And why they often compete for the same women if possessions are their hangin out group of choice. Man doings don't make much sense to me sometimes. Think I'd rather deal with the coyotes.

The moon rose, nearly full. It was heavenly to simply be still. Not driving. Not shooting pics. Not practicing an instrument, planning, eating, or viewing an exhibit. Just being.

I began each morning by thanking God for all the blessings. Ended my days that way, too, usually. I'd sought God in these parks and found peace. This was my pilgrimage. Had no need to go to Africa, India or Israel. And if God was displeased, I was surprised. I felt like I was learning to fly. Becoming. Moving in the right direction at the pace I was supposed to be.

I'd broken my word by divorcing. Although I knew God did not approve, I felt forgiven and accepted, liberated, and encouraged to keep growing and going. Both my ex and I still have so much more living to do...



August 6, 2009 Yellowstone, Wyoming

Yosemite's apparent seismic activity and coastal tsunami warning signs, as well as earthquake museums, remind me of how very dependent we are upon a planet we do not always treat well.

~ Stewards ~

At Earth's fiery heart

A core of life

Phoenix rising

Human occupation of her crust

So very recent

In planetary time a blinking eye

*Sun worshipers beneath fragile skies
Dwell in thin layer between magma and void
We are guests in this house
Those too rude she'll cast out
Trust we so greatly in space hospitality?
It is good to breathe
Exploring inner and outer space
In the comforts of home
Neither rented nor purchased
This place is ours on loan.*

Yellowstone was a photographic challenge beyond my skill level. The sheer scope and panoramic splendor defied my little digital camera's capabilities. The landscape made Dante's Inferno believable.

Boiling mud, and gouts of foul-smelling gas rising from holes in the ground blessed with picturesque names like "Sulphur Caldron" called the lens. Scalding "Mud Volcano" erupts. Geysers blow skyward at regular intervals. In many places along the roads circling the park, the earth itself steamed, a constant sulphurous wind rising.

But it was near impossible to stop or slow long enough to capture some of the geological features interestingly on film. There were few pullouts, several construction-related traffic jams, and many animal crossings and tailgaters. To see Yellowstone well, one must hike. Or fly.

The park roads and the southern approach were a madhouse. Touristy Jackson Hole should not have bothered me, since I was, after all, a tourist. But the sheer numbers of people moving around in unpredictable directions at high speeds was nerve wracking. Nor did they slow down or use more common sense in the park itself, despite wildlife and road construction.

Elk and buffalo graze very close to Yellowstone roads, and so many are killed by cars that rangers specifically requested that people slow down when entering the park. Flashing monitors remind people that hitting a 3000 pound animal at 50 MPH or more will ruin their day. Apparently, it doesn't sink in.

Doing 45, I was being cursed roundly by motorists passing at 65mph. All the campsites in ALL the campgrounds in the park were full by 1pm. I soaked in the grandeur of the Tetons and looked longingly at the rivers rushing by. There was nowhere to stop, and most of the water here is hazardous for me due to geothermal activity and weather. Water cold enough to cause rapid hypothermia sits atop a lakebed hot enough to cook the unwary. Rivers meander innocently, then drop abruptly into rapids and huge falls or flow through boiling mud flows.

A spectacular lightning storm broke over the lake, and sheets flashed across the dark sky. Then lightning reached for the lake, and I watched in fascination as forked white tongues danced over a cauldron of surf. People die from lightning strikes here every year, and as I watched other park visitors standing out on the edge of the cliff like lightning rods, I understood why.

Cooling off in the rain was appealing, as was the fresh pine scent filling the air. But the storm stirred the lake into a vast, fearsome thing. Frothing, electrified water below bare rocky height testified to nature's might. I felt stunningly alive, but content to remain in the truck as rain and lightning sheeted around it.

Years ago, a small earthquake caused a landslide that wiped out a good portion of one of Yellowstone's campground and killed several people. The entire area is so seismically active that major earthquakes are a definite possibility. Looking at the huge body of water below, I wondered what sort of waves such a quake would generate. And exactly how badly a stay at one of the posh lakeside lodges might end. And then I smiled sardonically, because I was starting to sound like a Hollywood disaster film script.

My mind switched to more everyday wonderings then, like how fish adapt to such varied water temps. And how wildlife cope with boiling sulphur springs. And how folks motor boating out on this lake have the patience to pull their boats in along these heavily trafficked roads.

Hayden Valley boasts several waterfalls, and provided a welcome stopping point along the circle tour of Yellowstone. Lush, green and heavily forested, here was a much-appreciated contrast to the golden brown hilly rangeland that covers the majority of Wyoming. I breathed in the presence of tall trees in quietly falling rain.

When the rain paused, I hiked the valley trail, enchanted by cool rain-washed forest and bold squirrels seriously scolding. The falls were furiously intense, high and massive. No frothy delicate streams-- these were torrents fed by rivers that give no quarter to anything caught in their current. Overlooks provided marvelous views within very comfortable hiking distance even for very little ones.

Every convenience imaginable is available at park lodgings and stores, including showers, flush toilets, a wide variety of foods, and church services. But gassing up inside the park is hard on the wallet. The wise motorist fills up in town and brings their own in, as well.

My cell phone was completely nonfunctional in Yellowstone, and I end up calling my mom from a pay phone using a phone card. Pay phones-- another handy service the park provides. The east entrance road is largely undeveloped and very spectacular, with sweeping mountainous curves and lake views. I finally found a campground 30 miles east, returning in dawn's light to tour the west side of the park.

A line of cars paused to photograph an elk back-deep in lush roadside graze. Light slants sideways through broken clouds, and I'm struck by the overwhelming beauty of the Grand Tetons scratching at the overcast sky.

I tried a few pictures of the elk, but she was beyond my camera's zoom capability. So I sat and watched her, thinking about reverence and relevance. The contrast between the choice to take a vacation in one of the most wildly beautiful regions of America and the carnage speeding causes on these roads. Don't we come here to see the very animals our recklessness kills? I'm struck by a phrase pulled from a park brochure on leave no trace ethics: "Do not destroy what you love."

Human beings alter their environment, sometimes without thought or intent. Sometimes without conscience. Our choices are relevant to wildlife's survival.

In another area of Yellowstone, a tunnel was created beneath the road after rangers realized that salamanders were being run over as they crossed from one side to the other to feed and breed. Important? Yes-- to the salamanders and to every small mammal and bird that eats them, and to the larger mammals that eat the small mammals. Human beings are part of the food chain and web of life, whether we revere it or not. Feelings of faith and belonging rose in me as a placid elk in a quiet Yellowstone meadow reaffirmed my belief that each creature, including me, is as it should be.

What is viewable from the roads in a few days doesn't even scratch the surface of the Yellowstone's wonders. But it was crowded and I was restless and Alaska-bound. And, once again, every campsite in the park was full.

West gate construction tied me up for a solid hour and, ultimately, prevented me from leaving the park by that direct route. I opted to get out of line and call my mom from a pay phone kiosk at a park rest area before the time difference caused her worry. By the time I headed back toward the west gate, the access road was

closed. I said a few choice words, then pulled out the map and consider my options.

I didn't want to revisit Jackson Hole and was headed northwest, the North gate was my next logical choice. North Yellowstone is rocky, steep, and wild. Black pit darkness fell at 9pm, and I picked my way carefully along winding roads until I reached a series of resort-style hotels and streets packed with young folks.

I wound my way through without hitting anyone, although half of them were walking in the middle of the road. Several miles later just past the park exit, bars and youth hotspots are hoppin! A huge moon rose, its color cycling from amber to blue to red, before it was obscured completely by dark clouds. I stand outside the truck at a pull off, surrounded by similarly awestruck people, and gawk. Attempts to photograph it produced a series of blobs, and I didn't think to switch to video. I was still bemusedly wondering what caused the lunar color shifts.

After gassing up, I called a friend to check in, and looked hopefully around for a camp spot. Plenty of hotels. Also many many people. I moved on. It was 11pm and had been pouring for 2 solid hours by the time I finally located a campsite northwest of Yellowstone. I pulled in, killed the engine, stretched across the seat, and gratefully passed out.

In Yellowstone, cars kill more than 100 bears, elk, bison, deer, moose, wolves every year.

Difference between a bison and a buffalo

Salamander crossing, Yellowstone

August 7, 2009 Wyoming

I'm up at dawn and headed Northwest across _____. Fog rolls down from the mountains, and I opt to hop on interstate _____, thinking visibility will be better. It isn't. But people are still going 90 miles and hour. Deciding making miles isn't worth dying for, I choose an off ramp marked "Manhattan" and head toward what I hope will be a quieter road. It's nearly the death of me. A white sports car going 50 miles an hour the wrong way up fog-shrouded freeway off ramp without lights on narrowly misses the truck. Still not sure how we missed each other-- it was one lane with narrow shoulders. Shaken, I pull into the store at the bottom of the ramp and take a breather. Buy a clean bandana. Wash my hair in the bathroom. Give prayerful thanks for my survival and switch to back roads until the fog burns off late in the morning.

Wyoming is golden. It reminds me of Big Sur with sky instead of ocean. The Madison and Beaverhead Rivers, with the cranes and ducks that populate them, are a marvelous surprise. Thunderheads loom and Flash flood warnings come over the radio. And then I am through the part of the state that receives frequent rainfall, passing through small towns full of dust and vacant lots. In one, a young Siamese cat leaps about acrobatically, chasing butterfly. My next laugh comes from an exuberant young German Shepherd bouncing around in the back of his owner's pickup in Lovell. Here I pause at the glorious Veteran's Memorial. A story-high, block-long mural commemorates all branches of the service, flags are flying, and there are plaques and artillery arranged beautifully in a well-kept park in the center of town. I am moved beyond words.

Bighorn Canyon and Wild Horse Preserve

Caroline Lockhart, writer, adventurer, western cattle baroness

Dryhead-- between Pryor and Big Horn mountains

Bighorn canyon golden eagles raptors bigger than a grown man's outspread arms
August 8-9, 2009 Idaho

Wildfire and sheep habitat and forests

Boat inspected and certified free of invasive aquatic species ID-- rules inconsistent from state to state, even within same state-- on the way through the first time they told me the kayak was too small to need inspection. In NM and Colorado, all watercraft including kayaks and jet skis are require inspection.

The peat log started with only one match and burned beautifully for a solid 2 hours. I made spaghetti with curly noodles, a packet of dry sauce and a can of spiced chunky tomatoes. Quick, easy, and amazingly edible. Read a couple Native American Ghost Stories from the book I bought at Craters of the Moon. That place had an awesome touchable exhibit and some great info about meteors and mars, but the lava fields creeped me out. Too barren for this girl. I need green stuff!

I planned a quiet day. Want to find a grocery store and buy several (4-6) peat fire logs so I can make hot food when I need it without having to worry about locating dry firewood. Can't transport it due to the pine beetle and emerald ash borer infestations that are running rampant. I'd like pancakes for breakfast and need to replenish my food supplies. Gave my rice to the man I met at Weber Creek up the

canyon in exchange for sharing his map. He was elf-like and oddly clean for a camper. And shrewd. I got wary after talking to him for awhile-- we were isolated and so many people out here hunt and are armed. I wish I were less fearful, but being cautious has kept me in one piece thus far.

Off road in Idaho. I pull off the highway, which is very dull, at an exit advertising opals. And opals there are-- both raw and polished. The first shop I stop at has tables full of raw stones and a proprietor so grouchy I get back in the truck and proceed to the jewelry shop down the road. Where the owner and I talk about beauty and the simple things our friends and loved ones share with us. The raw opal chunk I buy from her wasn't for sale-- I negotiated to purchase after seeing it in a display case. I'm not terribly fond of jewelry, and the only piece I see that I love, teardrop-shaped opal in a silver pendant, costs \$600. I pay \$30 for my lovely little hunk of opal and enjoy it immensely.

Happier off the highway, I head North on gravel and dirt roads until I run out of them. Far-flung ranches and the occasional sign advertising a hoe business dot the flat landscape. Then I pass through a river valley with canyon walls rising on either side. The river, of course, is behind barbed wire. The road rises steadily past open range cattle and into the unspectacular but quite rugged Iguana Mountains. They lay in brown swells juxtaposed to miles of tilled potato fields, as though immense dun lizards simply rolled on their sides and slept, covered by a thin blanket of dirt. There's more rock than grass or tree except directly beside the river. Eventually, the road ends in a turnaround. And, sighing, I head back to the highway. On the way out, I look at the one-room schoolhouse with separate pit toilet. It is the size of a toll booth. I wonder what the odds are of it having a furnace or electricity. Clearly, daily life is very different here than in Milwaukee.

Central Idaho Snowy peaks, Pettit Lake, Salmon River, Clean and silent

"Winston" the terrier wags, In The House of Stone and Light

Wide spaces high altitudes hear myself think and hear/feel God more clearly

Payette River, Middle Fork Road, Boise National Forest, Malfunction Junction, Rattlesnake Creek Camp

Craters of the Moon, ID There is a reason astronauts practice moon walks here. Caves, a wonderful bookstore, touchable exhibits.

August 10, 2009 Washington

Rough night. Urban campground just off the highway-- road noise kept me awake most of the night. Won't make that mistake twice! Laughing in disbelief watching 2 llamas standing patiently in the back of a truck as they are hauled down the road at 60 mph. The Northern Cascades are breathtaking. Dense Pacific Rainforest drapes mountains. Clean water. Rte 20 West of Winthrop, WA, I pass a married couple on tandems ascending steadily toward the mountain tops towing their 4 little ones on tandems. Tears of joy in my eyes as I drive along the coast. So beautiful, even in the rain. The card reader the Best Buy sales associate sold me yesterday in Spokane works beautifully. Took awhile to go through all my stuff and organize, then figure out how to hook up the computer safely in the downpour and work the card reader. Am learning. Slowly.

Uploaded about 2000 pics to be sure that if my cameras are stolen or destroyed, I still will have the pictorial memories of this journey. Am thoroughly sick of looking at them for the moment, since this process was lengthy. But I know I will be glad I have them when it comes time to talk and write about traveling. Got money changed. Sorted, organized and downsized, prepping for customs. Threw out or recycled everything I don't need. There's a burn ban due to forest fire danger, so got a restaurant Calzone, bread and veggies. Very Yummy. Bought hiking boots-- will need them in Alaska because the aqua socks will not be warm enough. Was an expensive day. It's still raining. 3am now and it's been dripping since noon. The truck is dry and warm and I have an internet hookup, so there really isn't much to complain about. Hopefully the weather in BC will be better.

August 11, 2009 Washington- toward AK

Good days. Just letting myself be. Living in the moment. Had become accustomed to my own company, with no need to seek anyone or anything else beyond what came naturally.

North Cascades National Park knocks me out with its rain-washed grandeur. Exposed rock faces alternate with glorious lakes and lush forests. Fallen trees lie beneath 4 feet of water so clear that every detail and individual algae stands out in relief. Organic farms and oyster stops don't give me pause, but a charming mural of an early model car in Concrete, Washington lures me from the road. The gallery across the street has an eye-popping collection of local work on consignment. Yarns, beadwork, matted photos, paintings, pottery. Awesome. I buy souvenirs for all the loved ones who keep me sane and help me in so many ways. The debit card has to be run twice, which is a shock. At this point in the trip, there's still

thousands in the account. It cooperates the second swipe, and I bid a smiling gallery hostess goodbye and make my way West to the Pacific.

The fabulous flower gardens and ocean views along the coastal highway make sun shine in my heart, despite heavy scattered showers. I stop at a bank to exchange currency, then at FedEx to mail everything I bought for friends, since I don't want to take them through customs. I buy a phone card in case my cell phone doesn't work in Canada. I've already spoken to my carrier, and they have warned me that roaming and long distance charges from Canada and Alaska will be between \$3 and \$4 per minute. The phone card is a much more sensible option.

For so much of America there is no words-- only awe and the land. Was listening to a radio spot featuring an author who writes of the London underworld. He said, "Nature makes me ill," and I smiled. WE are nature. We don't live above it or in spite of it. If its discomforts and demands remind him too clearly of that fact, it's a pity. Because when you miss the point that we are a part of the world, you also miss its beauty.

I spend the night in the RV section of Birch Bay State Park campground, ten miles south of the Canadian border. The rain is getting to me, and I rig a tarp from the truck window over the electrical post so I can plug my computer in. It's cozy in the cab, despite the dark downpour spattering against the windows. I catch up on email, blogs and bills, then curl up for a night's rest.

Sauk View Gallery Concrete, WA-- glorious quality various art forms on consignment

August 12, 2009 Entering BC

The next stage of my journey makes me re-examine my views toward security, fear and authority.

~ Differences We Make ~

Vast voracious annoyance--

food disappearance

from unlocked staff room fridge

scattered over weeks

always different lunch bags

pilfered
but staffers compared notes
sum totaled
sandwiches devoured
a missing orange
a face glimpsed
once too often
in the student lounge
The cops took her out in handcuffs--
that hungry homeless girl
who'd foraged at the liberal college
that taught its students to fight world hunger.

Entering Canada--

Concrete artist shop, the herons in trench coats, rainy coast, mailing everything I could possibly to friends so I wouldn't have to declare it. Organizing. Carefully packed things rummaged through. I anticipated it, but am still resentful. Why Don't they just get some drug sniffing dogs? It would cut the time needed to search way down and save everyone aggravation. And, really, treating me like a shiftless vagrant wanting to squat was not a great PR move. I am not affluent, but I have friends who are. And by the end of the week all of them have heard about how I was treated at Canadian customs.

My first night in Canada is not at all what I anticipated. After finally clearing customs, I politely asked the Mounty directing cars through how to reach Highway 1. He gestured vaguely, "That way." My opinion of Mounties is not high by this point. And, frankly, if they offered me a job and a place to stay in Canada I would tell them where they could put it. I miss the entrance to the highway and end up touring several suburbs of Victoria, British Columbia. Then nearly in the city itself as I try to find my way through a tangle of unfamiliar bridges and highways.

After 2 hours, I manage to escape and end up Northbound on the Canadian mainland. Devoutly grateful, I vow to spend as little time as possible in major cities for the remainder of my journey.

Another piece of bad news finds me. There's a burn ban on through the entire length of BC. I won't be able to make myself hot meals over a campfire because it's been so dry fires aren't allowed. I am in a truly foul mood as I set cruise control and put miles between myself and the border. But my mood will hurt no one but myself. By the time I've covered 400 miles, I'm nearing philosophical. I can find a hot meal once a day. It will do nasty things to my budget, but that is what I need to do to stay healthy.

Enter glitches 3 and 4. My cell phone doesn't work, so I will have to find pay phones. And-- surprise!-- my bank has an independent fraud protection division that keeps flagging my debit card due to widely distributed geography of purchases, even though I tell them repeatedly that I am on an extended road trip and give them the route. For the next 3 weeks I am never sure if they will allow me to access my account using my VISA debit. I didn't bring the MasterCard because I had no intention of accruing debt on this trip. And few vendors up here accept Discover. So I spend much more time than I would like to on pay phones working through my bank's administrative snafus. I develop a sense of humor about it after awhile in sheer self defense. I also become determined to switch banks when I get back to Wisconsin. I would have had to do so anyhow, since I plan to relocate outside the area my bank services. Now I have reasons to switch beyond mere practicality. I am pissed off.

I use a bit of the Canadian money I got in Washington to buy dinner at a roadside produce market. The distance between towns is becoming much longer, and it's 9pm by the time I spot Willow Springs Campground near Clinton, BC. The Paul Bunyan sized chair they have posted at the roadside next to the driveway reels me in. The proprietress tells me there are showers, which makes my day. Half hour later my tent is up, my cold dinner is eaten, and I've collapsed gratefully onto my sleeping bag.

Road noise rouses me several times in the night-- this is a major truck route. Engine brakes wake me in the early light, and I break the tent down and pack up as quietly as I can manage. There's a lovely little pond with waterfowl on it at the back of the property. The kayak slides in silently, and I spend a happy half hour skimming over a crystal clear underwater kingdom. The green algae here grows in round clumps, as neat as a formal English garden topiary. There's a small stream flowing to the pond, which the water birds shyly retreat into. I have no wish to disturb their feeding, so simply take a quick survey of the glorious deep green algae and other pond plants. Then I go find the showers, eat a quick breakfast of granola and juice, and begin my travel day.

Lower BC reminds me very much of resort areas in Wisconsin. It's overcast and, sometimes, drizzling. Motorboats laden with fishermen dot the mid-sized lakes and sometimes big stretches of water appear roadside. Unimpressed, I watch the many accommodations for travelers go by. Larger towns and little villages click by, similar to so many I have seen in the Midwest. The Badger crossing signs, though, make me laugh. This night I pull far off the paved road into a managed forest. They are actively logging the area, and my feeling is that it is over fished and not very diverse in terms of plant or animal species. The radio tells me a good percentage of the sturgeon stocked didn't find their way back here, and fishermen are quite upset about scarcity and limits. It's also heavily hunted, I suspect, because animals melt into the underbrush at the first sign of this human. I stop the truck and kill the lights beside a roadside lake of perhaps 40 acres. There's a breathless silence for about 10 minutes as the wild things wait and the sunset turns the horizon pink. Then the call of a loon floats over darkening water, and insect sounds rise. I sleep soundly.

Morning suggests that this is a favorite picnic area-- there's a dirty sock and some litter discarded by the shallow area where people clearly have launched boats. Low-hanging clouds discourage me from putting the boat in, as do dampness and chill. And thus the weather remains for the next day and ½. Gas prices rise horrendously, and widely spread towns support only one station. Paying by the liter in Canadian, it doesn't seem so painful. I wince when I convert the figures to gallons and dollars. I find I must carefully remind myself to gas up when the opportunity presents itself, because my tank will take me 400 miles but I am covering between 300 and 600 in a day.

Running out in the isolated stretches of highway I am seeing is absolutely unappealing. So is stopping-- at one station the clerk demands a credit card up front, even though I have ordered food and go out to put \$15 Canadian into the tank. Returning, I see that she has placed my card face outward in a rack in full view of several other customers. And I wish she were as paranoid on my behalf as she is for herself! She returns the card with my bowl of soup and tells me, "I just don't want to lose my job." I pocket it without comment, wondering to myself where exactly drive offs can realistically go here. There are very few paved roads. And the Royal Canadian Mounties have choppers.

I am disgusted with Canada and Canadians by this point, and just wanting to get to Alaska. Food selections at the overpriced and widely spaced stores in minute roadside stores are limited, and the burn ban has definitely caused me hardship. By the time I roll into Ma's restaurant off highway ____ in Upper BC the next

morning, I am chary of the folks and starved. A man sitting outside the restaurant door acknowledges me with a pleasant greeting, which I return.

Inside, the first thing I see is a sign stating that the management reserves the right to deny service to anyone. I look at the gent behind the counter and ask if they have eggs. They do. "Are you hungry?" he counters. I tell him I am, and smile. They give me a table and a menu. I drink orange juice and have a truly delightful solid meal-- eggs, bacon, toast and a lumberjack sized portion of hashed browns. Their bathroom is clean and pleasantly decorated, something I appreciate after miles of pits or gas station utilitarian. The couples at nearby tables are also travelers. I hide in a book while they chat amongst themselves. The French couple seem quite nice. But the man talking to the woman at the next table over spends a solid half hour telling her about his business trials and triumphs, and the incompetence and nerve of his employees. She listens with considerably more patience than I have. He's just reminded me that I much prefer being alone than with someone who is boring and certain the world revolves around him.

The waitress is good, and I tip her well. She looks surprised-- I think they thought they were feeding me gratis. I am overtired, underfed, aggravated, and making no effort to look prosperous, so probably have the hangdog look of one down on her luck. This is somewhat intentional, since I am a small, unarmed female traveling through isolated areas by myself. Many people in the areas I have traveled through hunt, so habitually carry knives and guns. My loved ones wanted me to get a gun, but I not only don't want to carry it or shoot anyone, I also don't want to deal with getting it through customs. I opted instead to avoid looking rich or attractive in the interests of not getting robbed or mugged. That does not mean, however, that I will cheat people who are good to me. I tip the surprised waitress, more grateful than irritated as I head rapidly out the door.

It's still overcast. I still don't like Canada. But my stomach is blessedly full and today I will reach the Yukon. A glimmer of sunshine finds its way through the clouds. This day I see my first mountain sheep-- a herd trot briskly down a road flanked on one side by sheer cliff and the other by a dark, cold lake. Road construction is plentiful, and surfaces alternate between gravel, loose dirt, and tarmac. I dodge a shovel in the road, watch a car behind me narrowly miss it, and tell the crew at the nearby construction area it's there. They decline to retrieve it or even move it out of traffic, telling me it isn't theirs. Since I'm in a one lane with no turnaround, there isn't much I can do to remedy the situation. I shake my head and drive North as quickly as my wheels can handle on these surfaces. At the next construction zone, the pretty woman who waves me through also tells me not to pass.

I realize why as I come out the other side a mile later and see a huge caravan of RVs stretching forward for a block. They are pulled off, waiting for the signal to start. I go around them at this wide, safe spot, very glad not to be behind them in the miles of winding roads to come. This part of the drive is quite beautiful, unspoiled compared to lower BC, and that and the good meal help. I'm in a better mood by the time I reach the Jade Shop and stop to stretch. The rock cutting apparatus outside interest me, as does the artistry of the animal carvings and jewelry inside. Books and cards by local artists are lovely to behold. I find a tiny polar bear with a fish in his mouth and a hunk of amethyst? that resembles an iceberg he can stand upon. Purchasing them for my grandmother is a pleasure. Other than food and gas, these are the only purchases I make in BC. An intentional choice based on the cold shoulder I received. I am delighted to cross into Yukon Territory.

Things I saw--

~ Enough ~

ends not meeting

so drowning my woes

ticketed for disorderly conduct

cop tells me

"You've had enough"

empty pockets

filled

with judgment and fumes

alcohol

makes the cardboard box

look like home

I have enough.

I shower, put on clean clothes, and organize everything packed into the truck before heading toward customs in the morning. The drive there is pleasant. The

coastal towns along Birch Bay have more blue herons than I have ever seen. They are staked out every hundred feet, huddled over fishing spots like little wizened men in overcoats. Sun is dancing on the shallow choppy water as I drive through roadside resorts.

Customs is worse than I anticipated. The young Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman who takes my passport asks me where I am headed, where I live, if I have a job, if I own a house, what I do, how much money is in my bank account. His manner at discovering I am an RN changes abruptly when he finds that I have not practiced in 6 months. Not satisfied with my answers about going to Alaska for pleasure and returning to visit my mom in MI afterward, he sends me in to speak with a superior and flags the truck for search. This I had expected-- there is a lot of stuff in the truck. What I do not expect is statements made by the senior RCMP to the effect that itinerants such as myself are a threat to jobs and national security. My lack of a job in the States alarms him, and the thousands in my bank account aren't enough to reassure. I patiently explain my itinerary, including the fact that I plan to catch a ferry back to Washington. I point out that I have an apartment with possession, as well as a family, back in the Midwest. I bite down on my sarcasm, my dislike for bullies and authority figures, and remind myself not to be my own worst enemy. I answer all of the Mountie's questions honestly, with a more direct and less condescending attitude than the one he is copping on me.

I am dismissed while they "review my case." Fuming silently, I wait 45 minutes while they manually go through everything in the truck bed and the cab. I wonder, if they are searching for drugs, why they don't save us all time and hassle and get themselves some trained dogs. I think about how much it will cost to fly or take the ferry to Alaska if I can't get through Canadian customs. I am, at last, allowed through very grudgingly. A Lady RCMP smiles at me-- I assume she found all the National Parks brochures I collected while going up and down the Rockies. I pass the "Welcome to Canada" sign muttering expletives under my breath.

Why is it that "authority" and "jerk" are so often synonymous? I am still smarting from the attitude that I would want to sneak into their country permanently and that I am not worthy of being a Canadian citizen several hours later when I call my mom to check in. And my resentment is not improved by the remainder of my stay in BC. I am not the only one who received this delightful welcome to BC, either. An elderly couple I overhear talking just over the Alaskan border are telling a ranger that their entire RV was torn apart and not put back together by RCMPs who failed to find anything. I wonder quietly if Americans treat Canadians this way, and why people are so afraid. 911 changed the way so many see things. I stop taking it personally, but still it saddens me.

August 13, 2009 British Columbia



So I got a call yesterday from the fraud division of my bank, stating that there were questionable charges on my account and ordering me to call them back. Which I had to track down a pay phone to do, since my cell phone gets no reception in the mountains of BC. Seems they have flagged the card because of charges made in widespread locations, even though I called my bank two weeks ago to let them know I was traveling and what my itinerary was. So they cleared the issue yesterday, but I had the same problem at a gas pump this morning. Good thing I am carrying cash! Called to find out what the problem is now and was told they had thrown me into fraud protection AGAIN.

That combined with the feeling of invasion that lingers from the customs grilling and the constant drizzle have dampened my enthusiasm for BC. I wouldn't stay in this county now if they paid me, not that I had any desire to do so in the first place! So far BC much resembles the less pretty parts of Washington State. There's a campfire ban throughout the province, so I cannot make pancakes, rice, spaghetti, or any of my other comfort foods. It's damp and raw, and my body craves those carbs for heat and energy. There's other stuff to eat, but I need one hot meal a day and that is costing me money I hadn't anticipated spending. Baked beans are good cold, at least.

Vancouver station "So tell me how you're feeling now that you've come out of the wilderness" Casino- Trust Yourself

Yahoo! Race Trac Fuels New Hazelton, BC friendly

Ptarmigan in BC

Stopped at the gas station pay phone while filling up and AGAIN had the bank remove the hold they had placed on my debit card for fraud protection. Last night I lost my temper and threatened to switch banks. This time, I demand to speak with a manager. I wait the moment it takes her (or whoever they have nominated to diffuse the hot caller) to come on the line. I reiterate my travel itinerary and timeline and jokingly comment that gas and food are rather important. My laughter, as sarcastic as it is, relieves the customer service person. She takes the hold off my card. I thank her and tell her I hope this is the last time I will be speaking with anyone at the bank until my trip ends in September.

August 14, 2009 Yukon Territory

Pine Lake near Whitehorse, Yukon

Whitefish Lake

ranger hottie with heart Gregory Cote Supervisor, Park Officers Yukon,

~ Patronizing ~

A pat on the head

I know what you need

Here-- try this

Volcanic resentment

Doesn't matter who's right

Must make own mistakes

Can't live without Pride

Much simpler

To Listen

Inner voices speak

Similar languages

Without insecurities

Sinners and Saints

Reaching

Out, not Down

No apology

No shame

No limits

Only

Human need

For understanding

For company

For compassion

Open hearts

Need no Hierarchies.

On the road--

ptarmigan

Smiley faced rock pile

Mamma Z's truly awesome food and service

Waddling porcupine

Mountain sheep

Brooke's Brook

Lolloping Bear

How does ptarmigan seasonal color change work, chemically?

Kluane, or Big Whitefish Lake, the largest lake in the Yukon, is the size of Lake Erie in the United States

At Shotgun _____ Annie's I get a decent meal and talk with a nice Canadian Couple. The sun is finally out! The waiter makes me laugh-- he's been to England and shares some of his travel experiences. Their lending library and appealing

selection of books to buy make me happy. I find two slim volumes of Robert Service and bear them away triumphantly.

Nice gas station guys who make me laugh-- 200 lb of chocolate and books

Really hot Canadian park ranger, full campground, fireworks, RCMP deterrent card

I pull into Pine Lake after a 14-hour day of driving. There's a mountain range and a huge lake between me and the next stopping place. I won't make it. As I pull my dusty chariot over to the self-registration station, an immaculately uniformed park ranger approaches the truck. "Are you full?" I ask, a shade desperately. "No-- just drive around. We should have a few still free." My heart does an odd little pause and hiccup when he smiles. He's handsome.

I thank him and drive around looking for a vacant spot. There are none. Back at the registration station, I look over the map of the grounds hoping there's another loop I missed. No such luck. The Canadian Adonis reappears. He takes in the situation-- my complete exhaustion and the full campground. I ask if there's a pull off I can safely stop at. He offers me his card, in case the Royal Canadian Mounted Police come through, and sends me over to the day use area. Handsome AND helpful. My cynical brain cautions, "Down girl, he's CANADIAN."

My horny little mischief imp doesn't CARE. My body tells them both their nuts and drives off to collapse in the day use area. I reflect, as I black the windows out, brush my teeth, and quickly sponge bathe with baby wipes, that perhaps it might be time to find a lover, provided that can be done with mutual satisfaction and no one getting damaged. I'm hoping to find my way to happiness with myself and a lover, at some point. And wishing the same for my ex. Right now there's a group of rowdy young guys over by the lake shooting off fireworks. I worry that the RCMPs will come to arrest them for illegal discharge of flammables and grab me in the process. I stack a pile of books against the blacked out windscreen with Hot Park Manager's card pressed against the glass. Then I curl into my sleeping bag and wait for the noise to end. 10 minutes later there is a cautious crunching of tires, a quiet conversation, much slamming of doors and starting of engines. And then blessed silence.

I'm so grateful I think of many completely inappropriate ways to thank the man as I fall irrevocably asleep.

Although my hormones are still purring like a Harley over that very healthy, vital park ranger in Pine Lake, Yukon. His card says he's a supervisor. He was so NOT self-important, rigid or stuffy. Authority sat well on him and didn't rankle when

he gave directions. Interesting. And he was very attractive. Ummmmm. Wonder if there are more where he came from? Still not into one night stands, even if he'd asked, but he made me remember that I'm not ancient!

August 15, 2009 Run for the Alaskan Border

I wake to a chilly, heavily overcast dim 7am light. Ranger Hottie forewarned me that the day use area would be locked from 10pm to 10am, so I walk around and investigate my temporary place of confinement. The truck is stuck inside the lot behind a sturdy locked gate, but this is no cause for worry. I watch falcons in the lakeside trees, then look carefully at the boat launch and water conditions. It's uncomfortably chilly. I eat breakfast and think. And then shrug and slip the boat into the lake. Fished to the point of barren, shores largely developed, it isn't very interesting. I head toward the marshy areas, hoping to see birds. There are some skittish coots.

Then I find a river inlet too shallow to allow most motor boats through. And enter a completely different world. Through the marsh and pitching shallows, into a lovely jungle of emerald underwater weed. Here pike lurk, aggressive enough to investigate the kayak before fading away. Turtles and thickly forested shores. Much more my thing. I linger, watching fish and birds until my hands go numb from the cold. Then paddle back out into the lake proper. The wind has picked up quite a bit, and waves hit me broadside as I fight my way back to the boat launch. I disembark gratefully, load the truck, and crawl back into the heated cab to go in search of breakfast. The gate is open now, the Hottie with Heart nowhere in sight. I send him the warmest vibes I can muster in my half-frozen state and hit the highway looking for a hearty breakfast and a hot drink.

Gyrhawk

Pike

Bald eagle

Broken overcast and cold wind kayaking

Alaskan customs cleared in 5 minutes

Sun breaks through and bathes the surrounding land in a golden glow

Visitor's center, an elderly man comments unhappily about BC attitude toward Americans-- "They want our money-- they just want nothing to do with us." I

agree with his impression, but think gratefully of the park ranger and wait staff who were kind to me.

Yahoo! Buckshot Betty's Beaver Creek, Yukon Territory great lending library and books for purchase, interesting souvenirs and really good affordable food

Have been pondering my future career direction. I want to work for Peace Corps or Red Cross, perhaps AmeriCorps or United Way. Definitely a non-profit, health care service-related and outside the hospital setting. And I am revisiting the private pilot license (PPL) dream I conceived in my early 20s. I surely would love to fly float planes!

Trying to figure out how to do my dream trip, which is a flyover of Alaska and Inuvuk, kayaking and camping on still waters-- and be reasonably safe and not broke. Mom checked on the cost of the ferry home-- \$500. Costs \$300 Canadian to drive it, plus wear and tear on me and the vehicle. And the drive was pretty, but not much fun. I'll ferry it back to the West Coast. Then drive through Oregon, northern Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, and Minnesota. Then see if I can find a ferry to Michigan. Or just charter a boat and get a look at the north shore of Superior and end up in Grand Haven or Muskegon. Don't know if charters will be able to load the truck, but it's worth a look. I wish I could fly over that entire leg of the trip, too. I want a float plane that can carry my kayak.

August 16, 2009 Valdez and Seward

The Ranting Raven -- Seward, AK art, book and clothing shop

Will have to call friends who are picking up my mail and let them know I won't be back in WI until September. There's a lot to do here and a week's worth of driving in order to get back to Michigan. And mom won't be happy unless I stay a few days. Need to see if my friend is cool with mail duty, or if I should contact the post office and have them hold the mail there. Also need to apply for jobs on the way home.

I liked Western Colorado very much. Hwy 139 especially. Also northern New Mexico, Oregon, and north central Idaho. I think my nursing license might be good in some of those states. But I would have to move there knowing no one and start from scratch. I think I'd rather use my mom's address as a base and take a 3-month travel nurse contract to scout the area out. Montana and Alaska are also possible, if I find pockets that are temperate enough and not dark all winter. It's beautiful here and there are abundant wetlands. And the glorious ocean. Where I settle will come down to jobs, cost of living, climate, boating regs, and water

rights, I think. Worry about moving so far from my mother and my grandmother, though.

Low River coursing wildly through Keystone Canyon. Fog-shrouded 55 degree and pouring Valdez streets and warm, light library

Hanging Worthington glacier

Tulsona Wilderness Campground

Valdez was beautiful, but foggy and fifty and pouring. The fog in Valdez is so thick and the water so trafficked that I forego putting the kayak in. I cannot be seen in these conditions and the likelihood of being run over by a commercial boat is high. I'm also unfamiliar with the tides and shoreline. There's a difference between adventure and suicide. Keystone Pass had the sprawling Low River frothing through at highway level. At one point, the turgid torrent has actually washed over its banks and the road.

A state trooper in rain gear is directing traffic through the 4" fast-flowing stream as others shore up the banks with sandbags. But there are advantages to the rain. Countless waterfalls cascade from high bluffs, decorating the walls of this pass. Hanging glaciers are visible in the background, the blue-tinted ice highly compressed. It's so pretty it hurts to look at. I stop often to click photos, frustrated by my lack of a panoramic lens. It is chilly and miserable outside the car, 50 degrees with a downpour and a misty fog that penetrates clothing with clammy fingers. The rolling wild Low is a great river to whitewater raft if you don't mind the cold. Gray, frigid glacial melt water.

I stop at the visitor's center in town, and the kind staffer tells me about laundromats and campgrounds safe for tenters like myself. Valdez library is dry and welcoming. I read native legends and dream of SCUBA in the Aleutians. Laundry done and dinner eaten, I look without enthusiasm at my drenched surroundings. The ferry to drier points west was twice the cost of driving so I'm pattering down the Alaska Highway toward Anchorage. I pull off the highway at a lovely campground with sites tucked beneath towering pines. Even this far north, the light fades fast due to overcast, and I'm asleep by 9 pm.

August 17, 2009 Palmer

It's Monday and Sunny, thank God!

Minnows flit away from paddle blades like the shadows of thoughts

Palmer grocery, gas station guys, truck service

Over 300 moose deaths, most around Anchorage and the major cities

Kasilof River moose sighting

No shoulders and tailgaters, no turnouts

Palmer, AK body shop-- U joint repair great service with great warmth

Carrs Safeway Palmer, AK veggies!

Alaska defies description. Like the Grand Canyon, photos only suggest the grandeur and scope. You have to experience it in person-- 3D and full sensory overload.

“trolls exist” “you’re beautiful” shotgun shells

Hunters on the river

Found good groceries and nice people in Palmer. Young men at the gas station told me where to find some nice lakes for kayaking. Getting the oil changed. And the squeaky brakes checked. Then going to check out those lakes. Maybe stay there tonight and go through Anchorage to Homer tomorrow. I want tide pools and relatively still water. Wildlife. At this point the only males I’m interested in have antlers.

Drive shaft is falling apart on the truck and differential is leaking oil-- they tell me they can get me on the road again for \$200 after oil change, repairs and labor. Brakes are fine. Reassuring. Would be surprised if something wasn’t broken on the truck after all the back roads and miles.

Palmer at the Garage

Pacific NW upper Washington was gorgeous-- particularly the Cascades. But wet and dark. Like Valdez. So basically that isn’t an option for me to live in. Will check out Oregon, northern Idaho, Montana on the way back to Michigan. I was going to go through Canada and over the top of Lake Superior. After the British Columbia and Canadian customs experience, I simply have no desire to. Will catch a ferry home and spend my money in America. So will have to go back through ND, MN and the UP. Wonder if I can go via a different route than I came out. Maybe take a charter around the painted rocks. No desire to drive through Chicago, so will probably stop in Peshtigo on my way home-- drop the kayak into the river that started the whole longing for this trip. There was nothing in BC either wildlife or resort that cannot be found in Maine, northern Minnesota, MI or WI.

This Yankee is perfectly content to go home. I liked Idaho, southwestern CO, and bits of Utah. California is too expensive. The unsustainable growth, water restrictions and boating regs in the west are unappealing to me. The Great Lakes do not exist so rich folk in Albuquerque can tap them once they've drained the Rio Grande and attached aquifer filling their swimming pools and irrigating their lawns! Albuquerque has 800,000 people and is still growing. Visions of CA sinkholes and wildfires fill my mind-- as in BC, there are too many people using limited resources with no plan in place for renewing them. I definitely do not want to be a part of that ugly scenario. The Mormons and the folks in BC also seemed quite uptight. Don't want to live in that atmosphere.

Have to laugh-- the Canadians definitely viewed me as a transient threat. They feared I wanted to take gas or a job, or that I'd be careless with their land. Clearly there have been Americans passing through there that have not behaved well. The RCMP who grilled me at customs was positive I would want to stay and he'd find me working at McDonald's somewhere. I didn't laugh, but it was funny. I hated fast food even as a teen and Canada's winters are more miserable than Wisconsin's. He needn't have worried. They were simply the land mass between me and Alaska.

Am enjoying Alaska so far, but don't think I'll care for winter here, either. And I don't like the fact that most food and other necessities are brought in. It's expensive and seems unnecessary to me. Gas is over \$3 a gallon, despite the fact that there's petroleum here. They can grow veggies and fruits, but most stuff seems to come up from the lower 40 ("Outside"). If I lived here, I'd have a greenhouse and raised beds and I'd be growing and canning my own. That's labor intensive, of course. It was cheaper and easier in WI to bop over to the farmer's market. Here not so much. There were a lot of fruit stands in BC-- also expensive. There are many greenhouses here and some landscaping centers. And horses. Not so many cattle. Musk ox farms. Managed Caribou herds. They have the sense to eat and raise what flourishes here naturally. Fish seems much more popular than beef.

Won't be stopping as much on the way home-- did most of my sight seeing on the way out. Skipped Death Valley, King's Canyon, Yosemite and Organ Pipe-- was too hot in the deserts and have seen Yosemite once. Liked it. Will probably do a virtual mule ride to floor of Grand Canyon and see Old Faithful erupt online, as well. Don't feel like I missed much otherwise. Did everything else I set out to do in the lower 40. Would go back to Canyonlands in winter, hire a guide and hike the Maze. Would also love to helicopter and hike Teddy Roosevelt NP. Think I may horseback ride on the way home. Or glider or parasail or hang glide.

Somewhere the terrain is different from what I'm used to, so I can learn something while I do so. I still smile when I think of the young TX cowboy who I went horseback riding with when Steve was deployed in Wichita Falls. Listening to his world view and seeing that part of the country through his eyes were very cool. And his manners were impeccable. Am hoping I can find hiking/bush pilot/kayaking guide(s) as good. Will go over Alaska thoroughly while I'm here because I doubt I'll get back. At least not anytime soon.

Truck's done. And it sounds the way it should-- no miscellaneous rattles or squeaks. Good. I can't tell you what's wrong with the thing, but I can usually tell you when there is something wrong. And I know the sound when it's running as it should.

My friend is cool with picking up my mail for a few more weeks. Am in no tearing hurry to get back to WI. Sun's still shining. Am content and ready to go out and have some fun!

August 18, 2009 Entering Homer

Stillwater inland kayaking

I cracked. After a month of sleeping in the tent or the truck, I rolled into Homer to find it teeming with people. There was a man sitting in his truck watching everyone at the beach campground and a string of bars less than 3 blocks away. I chickened out and retreated out of town and uphill to a luxurious hotel room with an ocean view. The hot shower (which did not have a timer or have to be fed quarters) and the potbellied stove were too seductive to resist :D As was an internet connection and a bed I can stretch out in and sleep until late morning. The Alaska Adventure Cabins "Moose Caboose" room has a deck and the bedroom window looks straight out at a national park across the bay, with little islands dotted about. At the public beach on the spit miles down the road there are folk camped everywhere, wall to wall RVs, restaurants, hotels jostling each other, every sort of tourist attraction you can imagine, a young lady flying a marvelous kite, and bald eagles fishing. After a month of seeing few people it was way overwhelming.

I plan to flight see and kayak around the parks, probably do an overnight kayak adventure before catching the ferry back to Washington. It stops at all the islands I wanted to see and I'll be camping out on deck. Will drive home through Oregon, Northern Idaho and Montana. Camp and stop here and there-- depends on what I see that appeals. I looked ND, MN and WI over thoroughly on the way out, so won't tarry there. Mom wants me to go back to MI for a few days-- think she wants

to make sure I'm really in one piece after all the traveling. I'll probably go through the UP. Maybe take a little boat tour of the painted rocks. I expect to be back in Milwaukee latest 2nd week Sept. Have to get all the stuff out of my apartment, find a job and get resettled before snow starts flying! Another winter in WI absolutely not appealing. But for the next few days I am simply going to enjoy Alaska :)

The Pacific is spectacular. Want to SCUBA dive and kayak the Aleutian Islands one day. Not ready and it's too late in the season this time. There are many unique species and it's gorgeous. Gold kelp. A floating anemone. All kinds of cool snails and a pink crusty algae. Cold water dive. I'd have to get certified and charter a float plane or boat to get to the dive sight. Which will take a whole lotta money I don't have. Kind of neat to dream about, though...

Kayaked a fresh water lake yesterday and there were at least 10 different kinds of water weed-- big, glorious, robust. Snails an inch long. Minnows and water birds everywhere. Pulled the kayak out and had to laugh even though I was a bit grossed out-- there was a leech on the bottom that was comically confused. It latched on to the hull, stood its little body up and waved its head around looking for the water it had been so rudely separated from. I'd already portaged several hundred feet by then and wasn't feeling kind enough to put him back in the lake, so I picked him off with a leaf and threw him in the woods. If leeches had faces, that one would have looked dismayed...

Was surprised by the tourist trap I found down on Homer spit. It's a Tuesday night. There were close to 500 people there anyway at 9:30ish. I didn't feel safe camping even sleeping in the truck. Not after watching some idiot throw rocks at a bald eagle because he wanted a pic of it flying. It was trying to eat a fish it had caught and it wasn't enough for the idiot to walk within 10 feet and interrupt its feeding. He wanted an action shot. I wanted to throw rocks at HIM.

8/18 Alaska Adventure Cabins Moose Caboose. \$263 Ok-- this was sheer financial stupidity, but a LOT of fun. Wouldn't be bad if split among 4 or 5 people. Great place to crash overnight before heading out on a kayaking overnigher.

Enjoyed the shower and puttering in the kitchenette. I am laying on a real couch playing on the net and planning to stretch out and sleep in a real bed for the first time in a month. It feels awesome! Civilization has its benefits!

Tomorrow I may pop across the bay to Kodiak on the ferry. They let you take your kayak and I could paddle there quite happily for several hours. This island is

open to the ocean, though, and I think it would be wiser to go with a buddy and get acclimated somewhere more sheltered. Need to make reservations for flight seeing the rest of Alaska and a 2 day kayak adventure. Then I'm ready to catch a ferry to Washington and start heading back toward Michigan. Am doing nesting and homebody sorts of things again-- curling up on the couch, buying and reading books, wanting to write, wanting to settle down and be productive and make a home again. Tired of eating out or crashing in the truck. Although I have had some great experiences doing those things. The smell of rain-washed wilderness, weasels and moose enlivening the drives, a seafood chowder today that made my taste buds smile and warmed my insides.

Am ready to let someone else drive for awhile, to share the company of other people (though certainly not several hundred at a time!). Enjoying emailing and talking with friends daily-- love knowing what is going on in their lives. Am content with my adventure and ready to move on to the next step in my life, whatever that may entail. Some useful work. Am leaning on God for guidance. Mom is anxious-- she worries about what I will do with myself once the money runs out. The same as I always have-- work my ass off and make more. She'd hoped I'd settle in Alaska. It's too cool and wet in the temperate regions, too dark everywhere else. But stunningly beautiful. I think no matter what I do she'll worry.

I am seriously thinking about Southwestern Colorado. Am going to have to do some serious job hunting and see what I can find in the areas I like. I don't need much. Just enough to pay the student loan and net and cell phone and room and board. Wealth would be nice, but I would rather do work that suits and satisfies me and live a lifestyle I enjoy. Luxury comes at too high a price. Travel has given me back my zest for life, but I need a little hidey hole someplace to call home. A trailer would be fine, but I have some thoughts about a bit of land and building a house out of hay bales and adobe or a bermed Quonset. I'll have to pay to have plumbing and electrical done, unless I want to figure that all out and try to do it myself. That's a bit daunting and I don't want to deal with the codes, so it would be worth paying a contractor.

Am thinking about rainwater collection. Wind and solar. Dreams for making a self-sufficient home. Will have to work like a Trojan to buy the land and materials, but won't have a mortgage if I go that route. And will be living consistently with my beliefs. Am probably always going to buy food rather than hunting, fishing and growing my own. I may keep a goat and a few chickens and a garden, but subsistence farming is hard labor and time intensive. When it comes right down to it, I want some time for art-- creating and appreciating that of others,

for music, and for nature/spiritual/outdoor pursuits. Sigh. Have been listening to the radio again-- there was a show on about how little time there is to create art when you're doing everything from scratch. Plus, I listened to my mom talk about living the way my dad wanted to often enough to know how hard subsistence farming is.

I wonder if my ex-husband is feeling as sad and disillusioned as I about the loss of a relationship that was supposed to sustain us through life. It didn't work out like that. The loss leaves a void. I hope we both find what we need. Have basically been praying for the safety, pain-free happiness, prosperity and well-being of all my friends and loved ones. I truly believe God hears those prayers. I was a lot less sure of that before this trip. It's been a quest-- for independence, self, spiritual renewal, meaning/purpose, adventure, joy, sense of place in the world... And I feel so utterly blessed.

August 19, 2009

Tide pool/shoreline kayaking Overnighter out of Homer, AK

At the ferry headquarters in Homer, I received another shock. My mom quoted \$500 for the lift from Alaska to Washington. My mom does not drive. Her price did not include vehicle passage, which added to my passenger fair comes to \$1150. Urk. I have it, and am road weary and disgusted enough with BC that I will cough up. But this part of the trip was an unforeseen luxury. Also, these ferries are reserved months in advance by many, and run a regular route that only passes through some locations once every two weeks. The ferry leaving for the Aleutians passed through yesterday.

I can't afford to wait for the next one, and am stunningly disappointed. But my busy little brain now begins planning a future trip to the land of the Midnight Sun, this time with SCUBA certification and enough dough to take a helicopter tour. My Bucket List is growing. The next ferry leaves in three days, but not from Homer. From Haines. I'll have to go through a piece of BC again after all. Groan. It'll land in Bellingham, WA, after several stops along the way. I buy the ticket and wonder quietly if I just should drive. Then I consider wear and tear on me and my chariot, and mileage, and decide it's worth the price. Besides, I enjoy boats and this is an opportunity to have a three-day adventure aboard.

Alaska Marine Highway reservations unless you want to add distance and time to your trip-- charged by length of vehicle. The saleswoman at Alaskan Ferry Adventures and I measure the truck and discuss transporting the kayak so that it overlaps the cab rather than hanging over the tailgate. This will save me over \$200. I grumble about heli fairs here, which are much more than the ones I paid in

Vegas. I won't be seeing Alaska from the air this trip. Boat, Humvie, dogsled, bush plane or train Alaska/Canada.

Boat charter vs. cruise Alaska. Small cruise ships offer the best bang for your buck, but scheduled stops mean you won't be able to see anything off the planned route unless you make advanced arrangements to do so. You can leave ships/ferries and rejoin them at later dates or locations.

My budget is completely blown and I won't be able to afford Kodiak or flights. I can dogsled in Wisconsin, and the ferry home will be my cruise. But there's still plenty to do! The weather is clear and I am looking at a long stretch of unspoiled coastline. Time to put the kayak in!

One thing rapidly becomes clear in Homer as I attempt to book a kayaking trip. I am a single person in a couple's paradise. My kayak is not suited to open ocean. All the expeditions here run with two-person kayaks. The three outfitters I talk with aren't willing to rent a boat to one person because the large craft are hard for one person to handle and keep up with the group. Two of them do try to locate another person to pair me with, but have no luck. One man jokes that there's a single guy looking to go and who knows where that might lead. I jokingly tell him the only males I am interested in at the moment have antlers. They aren't able to track the elusive single potential kayaker down in time for me to join a day trip.

On my own, I wander into the Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies. Where they set me up with a list of water taxis in town and suggest I call one for a lift to a good kayaking cove, since I have my own boat. Provided I can find someplace sheltered from the open ocean, I'm all for it.

Mako's Water Taxi (www.makoswatertaxi.com, 907-235-9055) which specializes in wildlife photography, schedules me for pickup in just over an hour, and I scramble through the truck for food, my wetsuit and anything else I can think of that I'll need. They give me the option to be picked up either two hours after I'm dropped off or the next day. I opt to stay overnight, which means I have to stuff my sleeping bag and the tent in the hull. It's a quick turnaround pickup and I haven't planned well. The water taxi staff help me load the kayak with a smile. I'm feeling rushed, aware that their timeline is tight, and apprehensive as I quiz the water taxi driver about conditions where we're going. He tells me the nearest town is 12 miles away, accessible by hitchhiking. There's no food available at the dock itself. Damn. I look at the provisions I packed and wonder if they'll be enough, especially after we agree on an afternoon rather than a morning pickup. I want to spend as much time on the water as possible. They're dropping me off around 5:30, with a pickup at 2 pm tomorrow, so I'll be able to kayak tonight and all

morning. I'm excited. And scared to death. I have never done anything like this before.

The Mulligan plows through fog-shrouded channels, dodging floating logs, and stops to drop another passenger off at the fishery. It's absolutely stunning-- clean river channels winding through marsh. I'm so tempted to get out there I almost do. But I can't river kayak other places, and this may be my only opportunity to experience Alaska's oceanfront wonders. My water taxi hero makes sure I am comfortable enough with my boat that I can handle the swell, warns me to camp above the high tide mark, makes sure I have a life vest and tide chart, and then hands me half a bag of Doritos and his dinner as he drops me off at the dock. He says he'll buy food in Homer and refuses to let me pay him. I watch the Mulligan pull back out to foggy sea with a huge smile on my face-- now how cool was he?

My overnight destination is a public dock with an almost full pit toilet and a motley assortment of trailers nearby. A gravel road runs the length of the little bay I'm camping in. It's heavily fished, with nets and lobster pots bobbing about at regular intervals. I'm skeptical about the quality and variety of critter I'll find, and also nervous. I have the clothes on my back and the wetsuit and sleeping bag. When I went to get the matches and cooking necessities from the larder in the back of my pickup, I discovered that the two day downpour in the Valdez area combined with lack of holes to drain the larder have led to soaked matches. I have no fire starting equipment. If it rains or gets below 50 tonight or I tip over, I will be miserable. Even dead, if I'm not careful. The water is cold, hypothermia or drowning real dangers. So I'm careful.

Even with the tent and supplies stuffed behind me and the sleeping bag jammed into the hull, the kayak is steady. None of this gear is designed to be lightweight, though, so portaging far is out of the question. Loaded as it is, the boat weighs twice as much as I do. I step in, cross my legs Indian style because the sleeping bag rolled into the hull has taken all the legroom, and paddle. It's a slack tide, for which I am grateful. There's no current to fight as I locate an island with solid timber seemingly a good distance from shore and paddle out. It isn't easy to climb up on-- the top of the island drops ten feet sheer to the water all along one side and a sloping beach on the other leads to a ragged-edged dune I scramble up. But the carpet of star moss under cypress is enchantingly thick, and I feel sheltered under the big trees. They are also proof that the island doesn't get submerged at high tide. The tent is set up in a twinkling, the sleeping bag and food and flashlight stashed inside.

I think carefully, then leave the wetsuit there as well. Between it and the sleeping bag, I will be alright even if I make a mistake and the rest of my clothing gets wet.

Then I climb back into the boat and cruise around the island. Incoming tide is shrinking the beach, and it pushes against me gently as I island hop. The gulls don't appreciate my curiosity. Clear water beckons, and depths vary from 2 to 30 feet as I cross channels between islands and the sides of the bay. The island I have chosen to camp on has the best cover, and I am contented with the setup. Far down the bay there's a house, and another is perched at the point looking out over the ocean.

Near the bay's mouth the current gets too rough, so I turn around and coast back inward. Below me a vibrant undersea world unfolds. A variety of jellyfish, sea stars, anemones and sea urchins feed in tide pools. I dodge fishing nets and am startled by a loud huffing sound. A head surfaces, eyeing me suspiciously. A large mammal-- seal or sea lion. I hastily back off. But eventually the current floats me back into his territory. Aggravated, he snorts again. I am trying to go around him when he and his mate erupt from the water and leap and torpedo away. Heart in mouth, I watch them go-- round, brown, streamlined, and incredibly graceful. Stellar sea lions are endangered here, and very rare. I doubt my eyes. But those didn't look like seals. I am sorry to have bothered them, whatever they are. And hope that they resettle again without having to go far.

The next surprise is a low chitter. An otter surfaces some 20 feet away and looks the boat over carefully. I wait. In Monterey an otter his size was none-too pleased to be sharing his kelp bed with a 16-foot kayak, so he shoved it out of his territory. My little kayak is shorter, lighter, and not equipped to fend off a determined angry sea otter. But this big guy seems more wary than aggressive. He moves further away and goes back to diving for dinner. I laugh in delight as he surfaces with mussels, slams them together with his front paws, sucks the meat from their broken shells, tosses them away, and repeats. Soon there is a chattering query and his mate comes to join him. I'm a delighted guest at an otter dinner party. And further down the bay, bald eagles are hunting.

Slow incoming tide drifts me silently over glassy channels. Kelp a story high brushes the keel and tiny crab stowaways retreats shyly under its fronds. Starfish the size of my torso cling upside down to rocky overhangs. Moon jellies and Andromeda's? sink beneath me, out of reach of the dipping paddle. Fleshy mushroom-shaped anemones tilts their faces upward, filtering food from the crystalline waters around me. Sea stars with over 20 legs in eye popping colors decorate the mussel-covered bottom.

Octopus, fairy shrimp, crabs, starfish, jellyfish

By the time the sun retreats behind the hill that defines my little bay, I am stiff and chilled but so full of wonder it doesn't occur to me to complain. I haul the kayak up onto the island I selected for camping, flip it over near my tent, and tie my food stash as far up a tree as I can reach. It isn't very high. Not enough to keep bears away or frustrate them in the least. I consider climbing the tree. But I'm bushed. I opt to leave it. Inside the tent, light rapidly failing, I cuddle into my dry wetsuit and crawl into my cozy sleeping bag. Sometime in the night I awake to the sound of rustling and quizzical chittering. "I didn't bring that food out here so you could steal it," I call crossly. There's a loud silence, then quiet padding as whatever my visitor is leaves.

August 20, 2009 Leaving Homer

In the morning light everything has changed. It's low tide and my island is high and dry. Water that lapped a few feet from my tent has now retreated 35 feet, and only one side of the island is feasible for portaging the kayak off of. The other is a steep drop of about a story into rocky water of debatable depth. I take a walk around to scope out the territory, and notice old fire rings where others have camped on this island's rocky, sometimes submerged beach. I am conscious of the crunching of mussels beneath my feet, and feel tremendously guilty. Clams are spouting off to one side of the island-- so many it looks like an in-ground sprinkler system. I have read about clamming, but have no digging equipment with me. Nor anything to start a fire to bake them with. So I watch them and smile, munch on a granola bar, and find what seems like a likely way to drop the kayak back in the sea.

I underestimate the draft and end up wading in water that, by my standards, is uncomfortably chilly. But, once again, I'm enchanted by the critters I see while gliding over the transparent sea. I drift down the bay, exploring the shoreline. Once again wind blows up from the water and hills as the sun rises, and I find myself fighting a stiff breeze and waves in 4 or 5 feet of water with a strong incoming tide. I divide the distances I want to cover carefully, unwilling to drown myself. Feeling my way up the shoreline until about noon, when I pull out on the beach to eat. A small fishing boat finds its way down the bay as I work my way up and skip over a shoal. We look each other over, then they turn around and head back to deeper water. I putter around islands dotted along the bay, then return to my camping spot and load the tent and sleeping bag.

The paddle back to the dock where the water taxi will come to retrieve me is against the incoming tide, and I want to be sure I make it in time. For once in my

life, I'm early. So I unload the sleeping bag and pop back out on the water. And the phone rings. It's the hotel in Homer-- they are having trouble running my card-- do I have another? I allow him to confirm the number and tell him to run it again, holding the line until it goes through. I curse my bank for the \$10 in roaming charges that call just cost me. They have just put the last hole in their own coffin-- I will switch banks as soon as possible. This one may not actually be their fault-- when I call they assure me there is no hold on the card. I thank them and hang up. My patience has expired. Then I smile, because I am on vacation in one of the most beautiful places in the world doing something that I love. I turn the phone OFF, get back into the kayak, and push off.

With the tide incoming, I no longer worry about being swept out to sea. Looking at the houses tucked into thick trees growing right to the tide line, I paddle my way along bluffs until I can view the wide stretch of the larger bay stretching away ahead of me. There's an island a few hundred yards out that I want to explore. My first attempt to reach it feels too rocky with currents crossing, and I float back in to quieter water. The wind changes and the water gets deeper. A half hour later I make the crossing and look at the island towering above me. Something still feels-- not right. I turn the boat back toward the dock, scooting to the comparative safety of shore. Looking back over my shoulder, I watch two sleek heads surface where I was a few moments previously. The seal or sea lion couple I unintentionally annoyed last night is still around. And they are a lot more graceful in the water than I am! They are incredibly powerful swimmers, and their water acrobatics are what I felt through the boat's thin keel.

Content with my adventure, I drift back to the dock and haul out. I retrieve the sleeping bag and soak in sun until the water taxi arrives. It isn't the Mulligan, and I'm surprised by the pang of disappointment I feel. I enjoyed her skipper and his father, who works at the fishery. This boat is smaller, sleeker and much faster. The interior is uncomfortably small for me in my current bedraggled and somewhat odorous condition. I find a nook in the lee of the cabin out of the wind and watch the wake whip out behind us.

The water taxi stops at a resort to load other passengers. They aren't yet at the dock, so I help the pilot and a resort staffer unload food supplies. It answers two of my questions-- how the resorts stock the gourmet food they feed tourists and how the water taxis make money other than passenger fares. Intelligently done.

The other passengers climb aboard. The man introduces himself politely and shakes my hand. The woman takes in my slept-in bedraggled kayaker look and I watch in amusement as her upper class nose tilts further upward. We pull away from the dock as she scrambles for her camera. His commentary that we'll be well

away before she gets the camera out for the picture of the resort amuses me. “Don’t help,” I quip. He smiles a bit, looks at my boat and asks me if I was out this morning. My affirmative seems to satisfy his mind that I may not always look like a vagrant. I try not to laugh. He’s immaculate in well made outdoor gear, and it’s hard to picture either him or his wife rumpled. My jeans look like they have been through the wars, and I forgot to bring a mirror. It can’t be good. Camera finally pulled from the bottom of her purse, she takes a few photos and then goes up to join her husband and the pilot in the boat house.

Sun has burned off the fog that blanketed this area yesterday. I breathe in fresh air and expansive mountain views as the dual engines jet us across huge Kachemak Kechimak Bay. The other lady passenger comes carefully back outside to take photos, and the pilot slacks speed momentarily. I ask about the substantial water birds, so much sturdier looking than inland species. He identifies them with an air that I should know already. He’s probably right. I could have done more research. But this is a fresh experience, the first that I jumped into without planning in years. I am not sorry.

Deposited at the dock without ceremony, I lug the kayak up a long gangway past 2 flirting couples. People are walking and shopping busily on the spit at Homer as I load up the truck. Despite the fact that I left my larder, gas can and some camping supplies in back unprotected overnight, nothing has been stolen. Even though I’m parked in an unsecured lot in the middle of the bar district on the teeming spit. I’m surprised-- and grateful. I’m also out of clean jeans, I realize as I climb in. I stop at the second hand store, where the clerk is warm and friendly, and find myself a sturdy clean, near-new pair of jeans for \$5. I fill up at the gas station and fight my way up the long hill leaving town in the glare of lowering afternoon sun. Then I’m flying back down the highway seeking a shower and a place to sleep.

August 21-23, 2009 Cook to Denali

The homes out here are pretty and well-maintained. A stunning wolverine mural decorates the front of the local high school. An airstreams painted like a 10-foot-long bumblebee has been adorned with antenna and a stinger. Further up the road near the Cook Peninsula, a 15-foot-high sculpture of a mosquito is strategically placed with its sucker draped over a park bench. Laughing, I pull off to snap photos and maybe food. The proprietress of the shop and her grandkids are sweet enough to make me cocoa, since I am not a coffee girl. Most of the accommodations around here are resorts tailored to fishermen, and they dot the streams hopefully, spaced at intervals just wide enough to allow them to use a pole.

Moose crossing signs appear often, but don't seem to make any impression on speeding drivers. A quick glance over my shoulder reveals a cow moose grazing in a sheltered inlet near a busy highway overpass. I get a much better view an hour later a few feet off the access road to the state park I have chosen to camp in tonight. She and a year-old-old calf are belly deep in the lush vegetation next to the road. I slow and pass cautiously, amazed by this place where such animals are common sights. Over 500 of them are killed on the roads here every year. The calf and I are at eye level as I pass. The cow moose's' shoulders reach the top of the truck.

Cook-- The_____ park enchants me. In many ways, it reminds me of the beautiful bluffs on the suburban Lake Michigan shoreline in Wisconsin. The beach is 100 feet below. Forests of 8-foot-tall angelica, which has a fist-sized sturdy stem, broad leaves and a lacey white plate-sized flower on top, stretch for a half mile around the campsite, which overlooks the ocean and a river delta. I cook myself dinner, then address the flooded larder issue. The canned goods look a bit the worse for wear, but will still be edible. The pancake mix has grown mold, and everything else from pots to cutlery needs to be washed. I dump a flood of musty-smelling water into the bushes and do all the dishes. Then I pull out my camp knife and the tent stake mallet and knock drainage holes in the bottom of the plastic Tupperware container I am using as a larder. And scrub it until it squeaks. After air drying, I refill the larder. Then head out to explore.

A rocky beach drops abruptly into ocean water far too muddy to reveal critters. Disappointed, I go take a look at the river. It's crowded. The fields around it are full of ATV riders and the shores are lined with fisherman. I smile at the sight of a rugged man in hip waders clutching a pole with a baby in a jerry carry out front and a toddler balanced on his hip. He certainly caught something!

Nino's Italian Eatery www.NinosItalianEatery.com Anchorage, AK

Glenn Allen, Alaska- Tolsona Wilderness Campground with showers and laundry and trees and creek

Full service (laundry, showers, fax) with lovely wooded campsites beside Tolsona Creek

Tolsona Wilderness Campground Glenn Allen, AK www.tolsona.com

8-21

Kayak algal bloom, loons, Stillwater by highway to Kenai Peninsula

Water quality studies and grant writing

8-22

Denali highway

Before I shut my eyes I dream of a partner in crime. I want to be held and cherished, spoken to as a person of worth and intelligence. Loved with No reservations. Denali, Haines

So I putter my way through the Cook Peninsula and Anchorage, then turn toward Denali. I spend the night parked just off the highway near a gas station, where one of the ladies who helps run the local wrecking crew has been kind enough to let me stop. She says she doesn't want to have to pick me off the highway, and it's still a good ways to Denali. I fill the tank and sleep solidly.

Pushing my way up highway ____ into _____, I stop for a hearty breakfast at the café in town, and am jokingly offered a waitressing job. It's been damp and overcast for 5 days, and winter temps here can reach forty below. I decline with thanks. The mature Native man at the gas station tells me the Denali Highway is full of hunters, and discourages me from driving the rutted surface. But Denali Park itself is only accessible on foot or by bus. I won't have the time to do the overnight if I am to make my ferry.

Denali Park terminal is quite civilized. Posting my Grandma's gift, I listen to the manager of the resort at the park tell the post office staffer that he sent his employees home this morning. It's late August, and winter is coming soon. At the park visitor center, I view their excellent orientation film and then walk over to talk with a ranger. The prospect of an overnight in the truck and then 12 hours on a tour bus doesn't appeal. I confirm with her that I will probably see similar wildlife along the Denali Highway, and that it is passable without a 4 wheel drive. Then I head east.

The road is passable--- just. Mostly potholes connected by bits of gravel. Spectacular. Rivers here are huge, fast, violent, gray, and glacier-fed. Signs warn that survival time once immersed is less than 4 minutes. The lakes are either imposingly large or tiny, and so cold they make Superior seem cozy. The sheer immensity of the ranges steals breath and dwarfs all human endeavor. Clear lakes dot green and red tundra, and I am so overwhelmed by the grandeur that I forget time and get lost in space. There are more hikers and campers here than hunters, and even those are widely spaced.

A landscape of hills painted in tender greens and crimson fireweed and stark exposed permafrost and rock layers stretches infinitely away. I follow the light, sun bursts gilding the land ahead of the truck. In the patchy overcast afternoon, a

caribou dances indecisively ahead of the truck, then bounds in a completely unique motion off the side of the road and disappears into the hills and valleys below. The tundra rolls, rising into mountains, crossed by broad river floodplains and the oil pipeline, falling into dells or sometimes chasms. The occasional hiker waves.

Campsites are usually occupied, but not full. I move on, hoping for a solitary camp. None to be found in the entire 130 miles of narrow road. I have come inland toward several cities, and this is their playground. Still, it is incredibly lovely. Dark cutouts of mountains and a biting wind call me to a halt about 40 miles south of Fairbanks, where I find a free lakeside campground. The water is cold and still, the ducks comfortable enough to talk quietly among themselves as I wake to the filtered light of early morning and fog. It's chilly enough that, for once, I do not consider kayaking.

The soup I buy at the deli in _____ fortifies me for the remainder of my Alaskan drive. Managed pine forest, military bases, and rural but tame roadsides don't appeal to me as I drive South back to Yukon Territory. Thankfully, the Canadian at customs is unfazed by me. She asks me why I am traveling and "for pleasure" is not an incendiary answer. I show her my ferry reservation and tell her I intend to visit my mother in Michigan. And am on my way in under 2 minutes. Minus the head scarf, I am pretty much in the same state of disreputability I was when I entered in Blaine. The ferry reservation is reassuring, I suppose. Whatever the reason, I surely am not complaining about better treatment this time!

The mountains continue to captivate as I find my way back to Whitefish Lake. It seems as large to me as Erie, and I resolve to look up its specs and maritime history. The towns here seem so very isolated, and Peninsulas carry ominous names like "Disaster Point." A police cruiser is staked out in front of the gas station beside the turn I must take to get to Haines. I eye him mistrustfully and head in the other direction doing well under the speed limit. It's dusk, and I probably should have stopped for gas, food and lodging. But I have had more than enough RCMP to last a lifetime. I opt to go for the town on the opposite end of the park. Which, I had forgotten, is quite large.

I run out of energy shortly after seeing a big black bruin on the side of the highway, separated from the inky night by my headlights. It's another hour and a mountain or four to the nearest town. Sleeping in the turnoffs feels too exposed on this long stretch of deserted road, so I keep going until I find the park campground. The gate is open, but it's deserted and the pay station is nowhere to be found. I watch restless wind stirring trees and grasses under a peek-a-boo moon and feel the caress of wetness that could mean snow. It is cold, around 45 degrees Fahrenheit.

And getting colder. It feels like Halloween, with the same sense of spirits abroad in the night. I curl into the cab of the truck and sleep.

I think Kenai was my Halloween. Gusty wind and moon barely peeking around black clouds. Black bears on the prowl and leaves gusting about. The smell of snow and leaf mold on the air. A deserted campground with no pay box to be found. The heavy flashlight I chose not to use because the light seemed so very conspicuous in that wild dark. I was comfortable without it.

The morning is frosty with snow flurries. I'm up with the light, afraid I will be snowed in on the wrong side of the passes. This is a land where "glacier view" is a selling point on many real estate locations. I would prefer to be viewing them from the southern side of the mountains at this point. I drive fast, pass Pine Lake, and I smile as I recall the handsome ranger. Still laughing about the smokin' hot Yukon ranger. No man's land surely surprised me! Didn't think I had a bit of oomph left in my exhausted body at that point in the day. But my crazy hormones had their own ideas. What a sweet memory.

BC miles fall away, and I roll into the outskirts of Haines about 9am. There's a much-needed gas pump and a staunchly conservative bar/breakfast joint with some of the funniest bumper stickers I have ever seen. Next to a parked heli, which the restaurant staff tell me is used for geological surveys. Satisfyingly full of potatoes and eggs, I go off to explore Haines.

August 24, 2009 Boarding the Alaska Ferry

I'm in Haines, AK, waiting for the ferry to arrive. Contented. It's wet and raw, but very lovely. Awoke in deserted Kluane campground under dark clouds and 40 degrees wondering if I would be snowed in. It drizzled but hasn't snowed. The fog has an almost mystical quality to it-- you become accustomed to the way it reflects light and dampens sound after awhile. It's peaceful.

Tried to shoot straight through from west of Grand Junction to Haines, but ran out of energy and camped in Canada again. No hassles at customs this time-- I had the ferry ticket purchased so they are no longer thinking I intend to stay. The customs lady actually wished me a safe trip, which was NICE. I didn't gas up in Haines Junction, as I should have, because there was a RCMP staking out the intersection. Got a few hundred miles into the park and thought about how stupid that was-- need to ensure my survival and stop letting these uniformed mucky mucks intimidate me. I had calculated, correctly, that I had enough gas to make it from border to border. But if I had been delayed or snowed in things would have been

ugly. I don't think I'd enjoy the truck cab much as a snowed in dwelling with no heater. And I wonder how often the plows go through route 3. Very glad I didn't have to find out!

Fall in Alaska is stunning. The tall white-barked trees turn gold against the deep black green of pine/spruce/tamarack, there's a crimson ground cover splashed across rolling green hills sprinkled with golden sedges. Breathtaking. The still water mirrors the mountains and sky. The glacial streams run gray white and muscle their way to the sea like ten thousand bulls raging with nostrils frothing. A lovely, deadly place. Even in summer Alaska does not strike me as a playground, although the rich treat it that way. This land is where you come to forage, hunt, fish, subsist as you may. I have been hesitant to take anything-- even clams-- that the locals use. Haven't needed to. There are groceries in major towns with PB and applesauce and the basic staples of my diet. Am driving the majority of the time, so haven't needed much in the way of refueling for the body. Have slept in the truck often because it's damp in in the forties. I cannot allow myself to get sick-- there is no one here to take care of me, no health insurance, and no money for medical bills.

I'm in Haines, Alaska, just about to board the ferry for a four day trip down to Bellingham, Washington. I'm opting that rather than driving back through BC because I found BC folk paranoid and lacking in hospitality. BUT I had a lovely time otherwise and am amazed by the awe-inspiring country I have driven through. Kachemak Bay octopus, several species of starfish, jellyfish and shellfish, sea lions, water clarity unbelievable. Caught a water taxi to a public dock there and kayaked for 4 hours evening, camped overnight on an island beneath ancient spruce on a moss carpet so deep it was like a mattress, then kayaked for 6 hours next day. Unforgettable.

They say the kayaking off Valdez is as good, but it was foggy and raining so hard when I was there I didn't attempt. Perhaps next time ;P Have had wonderful food-- Canadians and Alaskans have a way with eggs. Denali was incredible. Disembark ferry 8am 28th, will drive through Oregon and Northern Idaho and Montana leisurely-- still hankering to see what's there. Then streak on through to Michigan to let mom lay eyes on me to assure herself I'm in one piece. She'll likely want me to stay a day or three. Then back to WI.

Have thought about many things. I like Alaska-- it has an abundance of natural beauty and the simple realities that I enjoy. The things that will kill you here seem clean compared to city life. I will not live here permanently because I need sunshine and warmth and light to thrive and this it cannot provide 9 months of the year. But I would like to come back to see/dive/kayak the Aleutians one day.

Sometimes I prefer the company of trees to that of people. I wonder if I'll ever be able to live in a city again after all the wilderness I've seen.

Time to choose a life that is right for me and wish my ex well as he does the same. There was a show on the radio last night about love and forgiveness. Yes, we all make mistakes. A simple truth. I think of the joy they gave me and the pain and there is no anger or blame. Simply a wish for love generously given and graciously received. We endure, perhaps better separately than we did when we saw each other. That isn't a lesson I expected to learn out here, but when you clear away all the distractions all you have left is basic truth and quiet clarity. My ex can no more be happy living my way than I could be living his.

Had to laugh at myself-- was near Palmer watching some guys on bikes pass. One did a gorgeous wheelie and I found myself wishing I were on the back of the bike, arms wrapped around him, feeling the wind. There are few things as sexy as motorcycles well ridden. Even the sound is wild...

Gonna hop on the net, see what's happening. Change clothes and get cleaned up in the bathroom here at the Haines library. Then make my way over to the ferry terminal. I have enough books to get me through the next 3 days and am hoping the sky will be clear at least part of the time at night so I can stargaze. There's the mandolin and the harmonica. And the simple pleasure of letting someone else drive! Should be a nice trip, with all that added to the sea and the natural wonders. I should be doing laundry but am opting to wait until Washington.

The ferry doesn't leave until 4, so I indulge my curiosity by driving alone the docks and looking at the homes and businesses. It's a pretty town, with more everyday businesses than tourist attractions. Totem pole carvings adorn homes and businesses, more for the pleasure of those living there than anything else. The library is occupied by laptop junkies like me and appealingly shaggy local teens. They have a clean, long-haired scruffy charm that makes me smile, attached as each of them are to beaded jewelry, ipods, and sometimes each other. I clean up as best I can in the restroom, change clothes, and go in search of the ferry.

The signs confuse me, so I stop at a place that advertises RV parking and laundry. The proprietor is warm and looks so Santa-like that I find myself delighted to be speaking with another human being. He directs me down a road that looks to be closed by construction, reassuring me that it goes through and ends at the terminal of the Alaska Ferry. He also takes the time to ensure that that is the one I want, since there's a local ferry terminal as well. I give him a grateful smile and a cheerful well wish, then bump my way down the muddy road to the ferry office. It's pouring. Again.

Alaska Marine Highway one-way fare \$350 for an adult passenger, plus \$800 for a vehicle up to 15 feet

Tack on \$150 additional up to 19 feet, another \$100 to 21 feet, then \$60 per additional foot. Motorcycles \$430. No surprise that there are several motorcycles waiting to board.

At the office, they issue me a boarding pass and remind me that I will be charged by vehicle length so I had better go rearrange the kayak so it fits within the bed of the truck. I slosh back outside, throw on my raingear, and undo the bicycle lock and bungee cords that have so faithfully fastened the kayak in a fairly streamlined and secure position throughout this trip. As it sits, the end overhangs the truck tailgate by about 2 feet. It won't ride well angled up over the cab, but at \$300 per extra foot I will find a way. It takes about twenty minutes, but I manage to bungee it steady at the upward angle. After a few experimental yanks, I get in line to board the ferry. Which unloads and loads with such precision it's intimidating.

They are on a tight schedule, in a hurry to clear this stop and move on. I'm directed to drop the gas can off at the paint locker once on board, then motioned onto the big metal elevator grid that lifts the truck to the second cargo deck. Within 5 minutes it's parked in so tight that the doors barely open. I go in search of the paint locker, then grab a duffel and wonder what to do next. A crew member tells me to get out of the cargo area, pointing impatiently toward a door that leads to the decks. I walk through it and around the entire ship, trying to familiarize myself with the layout.

There is no tent camping on the decks, and I have not the shekles for a cabin. So my choices are to sleep in the solarium on a chaise lounge under heat lamps, with about 25 other people doing the same thing. Or to find a place in one of the lounges. Because the rain and the damp are chewing at my chilled bones, I opt for the latter. Family groups have staked out sleeping areas throughout most of the lounges. I find two unoccupied seats in a glassed-in area and drop my duffel and cooler. Then peel out of my thoroughly drenched rain gear. And go to take advantage of the showers I spotted on the way up. To my complete and astonished delight, they have hot water and do NOT require quarters. Half hour later, clean and smiling, I settle into my upholstered vantage point with a book. And watch Haines receding into the distance as we journey down the Inland Passage.

Alaska Marine Highway, Haines to Bellingham

Sitka

Ketchikan

Whale/wildlife watching

Backcountry hiking with knowledgeable guide

Float/bush plane tour of state with safe, knowledgeable pilot Pilots are limited to 8 hours of flying per day. The state cannot be seen from the air in less than 5 or 6 days.

I start the trip intending to research Jam and open mic opportunities along my route. Not only am I not spending any time in major cities, but being the only female in a rural bar surrounded by unfamiliar isolated territory does not appeal to me. I play to entertain myself and consider stopping at the county fairs I come across. The lure of the road and the wilderness is always stronger. So I'm really glad to see some guitar-carrying guys on the ferry from Alaska to Washington. I am NOT glad that they get put away not to be seen again. By day 2 I'm tired of reading, talking and watching movies. I want to make some music, but I don't want to inflict my sounds on anyone. There aren't many secluded nooks on the ferry. I try a lobby, but there are people trying to sleep in a nearby lounge. When it's not raining, I settle onto a life preserver container with a nice view out over the water and strum softly. It still surprises me when people stop to listen.

The first time it happened, I was waiting for another ferry and settled on a bench outside the terminal to while away some time by picking. It was hot, and the terminal was air-conditioned. About ten people wandered out to smoke and watch the boat come in. A few listened. One struck up a conversation, asking me if I was in a band. It was the first-time picking had drawn anyone to me like that, and I was gruff and abrupt. Defensively wondering if he was making fun of me. He wasn't. This time, when someone tells me to play louder so they can hear me I teasingly tell her she may not want to. But I pump up the energy high enough that my arrangements drift over to her on the breeze. She doesn't leave. A few people comment favorably, a few head the other way. I've grown into my skin enough now that neither reaction throws me.

A handsome guy strikes up a conversation and tries to draw me into his party. He's tempting. Clean cut and personable and easy to talk to. But he's also buzzin' happily and far too young for me. His friends come to collect him and he invites, but I wave goodbye with thanks. The bar is just not my scene. I actually want sleep. And not to disappoint someone when I know I won't be ready to finish his evening the way he's hoping.

By the final evening on the ferry, my favorite PR woman has organized and impromptu jam in the ferry pub. Four singers, three with guitars and one on piano. All of them seem to be song writers, as well. I walk in, sit down next to my friend,

and listen contentedly. She wants me to join in. I dither until I hear a good cover of Simon and Garfunkle's the Boxer, a familiar approachable piece. None of these musicians seem to need to monopolize or demand solo time. The jam is low key. I pull my mandolin out of its storage locker and ask if I can join them before I realize what the humidity has done to the tuning. By the time I get all 8 strings perfect, it'll be midnight. I opt to compensate by simply not playing open strings--the instrument is tuned to itself quite well, about a whole step higher than they are.

There are raised eyebrows, but they start another cover tune without comment. It's comfortable, the give and take as people jump in and out for feature moments. The oldest guitarist and singer leads. He's understated in his approach to directing, dressed simply in a baseball cap and T and jeans, expertly playing an instrument that the young pro next to me is viewing with such awe I suspect it's worth a small fortune. I wonder who he is and then quietly decide it's probably better for my nerves and morale if I don't know.

The other musicians carry on a highly technical conversation about recording techniques. I shut up, out of my depth and wondering what I've gotten myself into. They have mastered an entire technical language and skill set that I don't fathom at all. One of the more amusing moments in the night is when the piano player asks us to accompany him on an original song he composed. "It's in F#," he preps. "Well change it!" the lead guitarist shoots back. I laugh, knowing how hard that key is on the guitar and that it's probably not going to be workable for me on the mandolin off the cuff.

The piano player does a solo. Then we switch to songs we know for awhile. Then they start a round robin of originals, adding to each other's tunes. I'm enchanted. THIS is what I've longed for in a jam. The handsome young man picking tunes beside me looks surprised when we finish playing one his cousin wrote. He says he used to hate country. I bite my tongue on the retort than when he grows up genre might matter less than pleasure. They have been careful not to make me feel stupid, and I'm returning the favor. I can remember being cocksure in my opinions and preferences in my early 20s. Life has softened the way I state them, over time. A lesson he hasn't learned yet. I wonder quietly what the actual age difference is--maybe 5 or ten years. Country clearly isn't cool enough for his rock n roll attitude. I shrug mentally. I don't care about cool. I just like music. When they play I feel at home. It's about the song-- not connections, flash, fame, technical expertise, or economics. Just music. Because I play by ear, remember lyrics and tunes, and compose on the fly, it's pure pleasure to improvise around four strong musicians. They are confident and relaxed enough that I stop worrying about what to do, add what I can, and stay out of the way the rest of the time. It's fun.

My organizing genius is feeling under the weather, so she's gone back up to the solarium to get some shuteye. My personable young Coast Guard guy shows up. I'm glad to see him again, but still completely unwilling to lead him on or raise false hopes. I smile and tease, wanting him to understand the enjoyment I won't put into words. He's encouraging while I finger around until I find working harmonies. I get caught up in the music, and he's gone before I realize it.

The evening ends with thanks as the barkeep makes leaving noises. I find myself tongue-tied in happiness, slipping away quietly while the guys talk. On my way to crash out in my sleeping bag in the lounge, I run into the group's unofficial leader and thank him. He tells me there's a bluegrass festival in Kodiak next summer I should think about coming to. It's tempting. I don't see myself as a bluegrass player, despite my choice of instrument. And I am awkwardly conscious that I might not be at the level of the other musicians attending. But the quickest way to boost my talent and inspiration is to hang around talented people. Particularly if they are also nice and willing to teach, either directly or by example. I'd learn a lot from a festival like that and get to see a terrific island. Financing it is another thing. I tell him I'll come if I can. He's clearly in another economic, as well as musical league. I'm touched by and grateful for the invite and don't want to say I doubt I'll be able to afford it. I'm still trying to figure out how to get to Molly Mason and Jay Unger's clinic before the year is out. It may have to wait until 2010, once I've found a place to live and a way to make ends meet.

The next morning I walk the upper deck and say casual goodbyes to the people I liked. The handsome entrepreneur who pointed out porpoises to me our second day out. The husky carpenter whose wife shopping had me running for cover, but who made me laugh. I feel like exchanging emails with the beautiful organizer. She's the only other female traveling solo with no room and she's been so very warm. She is starting a new life for herself, as well. I didn't ask her story in great detail. Now I'm wishing I had. She's an interesting person who I like and would enjoy having as a friend. But I don't know how to say that or suggest an email exchange, so I just wish her luck and hope our paths will cross again. The same is true for the young Coast Guard man who gave me so much enjoyment. The simple desire to hug him wars with shyness. Shyness wins. I wish him luck at his new assignment and head for my truck. He hovers briefly in the stairwell, wondering if he should offer to carry any of the pile of stuff I pull out of my locker. But I juggle things around and find a way to manage without asking or him offering. And then the ferry docks and the next part of our lives is rushing up to meet us all.

August 26, 2009 Ferry Ride

Despite the heartbreak, I feel the divorce was the right decision. I think both Steve and I can be more prosperous and happier with other people. Hopefully folks who share our basic pleasures and enjoy the lifestyle that best suits us.

Had a young man I actually liked come over and talk to me a few nights ago. I think he was hoping for nocturnal company. I considered it, then sent him back to his friends before I wasted much more than half hour of his time. I don't believe in sticking with someone all night when I'm still not ready to finish the evening in a way he'd find satisfying. I really don't want a one night stand anyway and he may have been half in the bag.

But there's never going to be anyone perfect and I will have to try again eventually. Shrug. Have decided, essentially, to find a spot to settle again before embarking on that adventure. Get my own goals clarified and my finances stabilized. Get to know someone without hurrying. Had someone else talk to me today telling me he's looking for a wife. Urk. I really don't want to get remarried. Honesty appreciated, though. Tells you that even if the person is awesome and seems like a romantic possibility you aren't headed in the same direction. The basic questions I want to know before I get attached again-- what are his Obsessions? Addictions? Strengths? Weaknesses? Goals? Dreams? Responsibilities? He may not see the strengths and weaknesses as I do, but listening to the way he presents them will give me a pretty good idea of his worldview and sense of self, and whether he's someone to trust. And if we're compatible,

I'm finding listening to other people's conversations a lot more interesting than conversing. People ask my opinions and plans and I tell them. They give some good feedback on places to see. And I learn nothing about their lives or viewpoints or aspirations. Have not mastered the art of seeming interested without prying. Am genuinely interested. Enjoy brainstorming and exploring options. People take it as advice. I have enough to do figuring out my own life-- wouldn't presume to tell anyone else what to do with theirs.

Ah, the things I'm learning about myself while I learn about America.

Didn't sleep well-- bunch of music lovers had an extended gab session about different tunes and bands on You Tube. Glad they had fun-- just wish they had done it in another room! I could go up to the Solarium, but the dampness chomps at my bones. They have heat lamps. Maybe will try that tonight- it has stopped raining as we get closer to Vancouver. Haven't been too claustrophobic on the ferry-- enough time on deck and shore to make it tolerable. Tried to get a water

taxi to take me across the cove to kayak yesterday when we docked with no success-- the one in Ketchikan doesn't provide pickup service for kayakers. It would have taken me too long to unload and portage and reload the kayak from the ferry deck, anyway. So instead of going to town in Ketchikan, I walked around the hillside neighborhoods and climbed up to the reservoir where locals fish. The forest was beautiful and it was blissfully quiet.

I'm finding letting go of certain things much better for me than hanging on. I may regret leaving the wedding album and love letters with my ex. We had some sweet times. But it's time to move forward and dwelling there doesn't help. At least I can think about and talk about it now without it hurting unbearably.

Am laughing more these days. Eating and sleeping alright. Not being particularly sociable, but more relaxed with the folks who choose to chat me up. Actually enjoy it at times. I think half of attraction is delusion, while love is about understanding and acceptance.

We're sailing away from the long daylight hours and I'll have to get used to it getting dark by 8 again. It should be warmer and dryer down here, which I do welcome. Not melting the kayak hot though, I hope! I know-- picky picky.

Clogging ferry-- whose plumbing is worse.

Each pole tells a story, but many symbols are not universal and stories are passed through verbal history. Once forgotten, the meaning of the pole is lost forever.

Dreams of kayaking and whale watching off Kodiak, and attending the summer music festival

Aleutian Chain, Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge

August 30, 2009 Washington, Oregon, Montana

I always considered Toto the smartest character in The Wizard of Oz. And, in my current single and scruffy state, the small dog is the one I most identify with!

~ Toto Barking ~

Unleashed in the aftermath of Cupid and Aphrodite

house-heavy reality drops on me

No place like home-- merely

*jagged backdrop of heartbreak
set behind gently lit scenes of loving,
friends, productive days
and clean, healing scents of gardenia and rain
If I growl ferociously
will they go away--these feelings
of solace and pain
simultaneously breathed?
Romantic fictions imbibed until OD'd
only intensify never-abating ache
Have sagas of love that never was or dies prematurely
become indelible autobiography?
I want to rebuild the Emerald City,
conceding "in love's" losing game
of venomous entanglement and witty sophistication
trade in my stubborn heart
for one so gluttoned with love
that it's become commonplace
Yet never blasé-- low priority--
Not simply another sumptuous bedchamber
or passing breeze gusting
through a wind-filled life
built on cyclone fever dreams
and interchangeable grand schemes
of security, freedom, desire and beauty
where "I" is sovereign
And love easily replaced*

*Such bitter draughts of gentle fantasies laid waste,
mouth full of unbending reality's alkali taste
Holes dug enthusiastically, madly, energetically
Am I, alone, assuredly to blame for my mistakes
yet none other responsible for faulty communications,
judgmental haste, self-righteous rage?
The tastes of freedom and aspiration
Sometimes offset the flavor of lonely.
Bones thrown so casually--
creative dreams and powerful feelings
dismissed with ease
unworthy of effort and time
"wasted" in unsuperficial face-to-face conversation
Games make for communication breaks,
degenerate into incomprehensible barking
Ill-at-ease pleadings from voices of need,
Expediency, honesty, practicality, mood, and meaning
Musical sirens of stage and demanding war machines
Mephistopheles of clashing strings, priorities and monkey wings
Oz stopped glittering when I perceived
That the man revealed by tugging the curtain aside
had no identity, no heart to give me
I believed in a pretty dream--
Synergy, wonder, joy and strength from pooled energies
My metropolis perhaps meant to be made*

of green growing things and solo noodlings
New creativity sprouting, rooting deeply,
Quietly buoyed by hope, watered by rain
beneath expansive sky thriving
Silent peace of heart and mind
spattered sparingly with companionship and ease
uncondescending
No longer suited to be a lap dog,
likely I best aid Dorothy
by walking a road stained gold by sunset glow
along which once-desperately howling zephyrs
anon playfully dance and whisper ballads tenderly
Shall I run to meet them with tail wagging?
Make it easy? Take it easy? Light and breezy?
Toto now knows quixotic joy
In Life's unpredictable immediacy.

I am wondering about the imprints events leave. Every place I pass through has a history. I am focusing on living in the now, so I do not spend much time exploring historical markers or sites. But I do read roadside plaques. And think of Japanese Internment Camps and segregation and immigration as I pass through territory tamed by the Rough Riders, railroads built by Chinese and Irish immigrants.

Oregon's southwestern badlands roll on seemingly into infinitely. These are the lands to which _____ Native American tribes were brought to die. Assistance promised never materialized. Starvation of children was finally used as the leverage to get partial delivery of promised supplies. But the bitterness of broken promises is commemorated on roadside placards here.

It has a harsh beauty and a brightly lit, wide open sky. I love it immediately. Ranches hide in the hills bordering those broad rolling stretches, and a tiny river winds through. Long stretches of miles separate minuscule towns with billboards that tell you that you blinked and missed it.

Winding through canyons and climbing steadily toward the dark sky, I watch the storm come on. Lightening forks between exposed crags ahead, and rainbows seem to drop down onto the cab of the semi I am following. Rain flirts at the edges of wind that rips through canyons smelling of ozone. I should be afraid. I am simply awed.

A few rain gusts buffet the truck but most of the water evaporates before hitting the ground. The river flows close to the road here, but behind barbed wire. I watch its twists and turns longingly, even though I know that flash floods and the threatening storm make this a most unwise time to venture in with the kayak.

I pause late in the evening to gas up, looking at an empty store front in an old building full of character with a longing that surprises me in its intensity. I want to settle here, to grow prosperity where there is only dust and emptiness right now. The young man who comes to pump my gas is gentle mannered and attractive. Oregon has created jobs by requiring that gas be pumped by the station attendant. For once, I don't mind. He fills the tank and we chat amiably as I scrub an inch of dust off the windshield and side mirrors. "There's a car wash," he offers helpfully. I laugh. The back of the truck is full of kayak, plastic pantry, bottled Gatorade, sleeping bag, dirty laundry in a dust-coated sack, life vest, and whatever else isn't riding comfortably in the cab. Taking it through a car wash isn't really feasible at the moment. So he checks my oil while I wash windows. He asks where I'm going and I tell him where I've been and what I hope yet to do. He looks over the bottled water and gas cans and compliments me on my preparedness. I think of the vast spaces I have driven, and the many I hope yet to traverse, and hope I have planned well enough.

Darkness finds me still on the road. The radio is good company, and weariness hasn't yet caught up with my spinning wheels. More rain is falling over the irrigated fields I pass through than the arid side of the mountains. The outskirts of Boise smell pleasantly of spicy onion, and billboards advertise Vidalias. I roll down the windows and feel the earth rush past, turning beneath me as I travel. Hoping to get through town before I camp, I cross the river and drive along the main thoroughfare. It is uncrowded. 9 pm on a weeknight in a town that feels agriculture even at its heart. I get turned around and cross the river twice more without reaching the campground I was aiming for. Worn out, I look for a quiet suburban nook in which to park. There aren't many spots where my presence will go unnoticed. I have no wish to speak with the police or disturb the neighbors. On a high bluff above the river, I spot a parked truck in a grassy meadow turnaround. Cautiously pulling off, I watch the occasional car pass on the road. This spot feels

safe. I black out the windows, listen to the end of the radio show that has me laughing, and then black out myself.

Liked Oregon very much. Will look for jobs there and in 4 corners, CO preferred. Have no net access in this campground and have slept in roadsides 2 nights running previous so will have to stop at a library tomorrow and get online. Am quite grumpy. The drive up 95 was as boring as the drive from Bend to Vale was enchanting. Whatever genius decided to clear-cut that entire section of Idaho apparently doesn't require shade or oxygen to breathe. And the rivers are being drained dry for irrigation.

Many rainbows and spectacular lightening in OR. Nicest guy at the gas station in Vale. Even like the spicy scent of the onion fields down around Boise, ID. And the Snake is very pretty. The guys at the watercraft inspection checkpoint assured me that I would be able to use the rivers without a hassle-- unlike in Utah.

Newberry National Volcano Monument

Cinder Hill Campground

Lavalands

LavaLands, central Oregon-- volcanic craters contain lovely (but crowded) makes ideal for small watercraft such as canoes and kayaks resorts, campgrounds, waterfalls, streams, and truly lovely trees

Funny Roadside Signage -- "peas on earth," and "give peas a chance," at a vegetable stand

"trolls exist," over a long span of bridge

"Whoa! Ya just missed town!" outside a 4-house settlement

Need to get my studio up and running and start playing music regularly-- forgot how happy it makes me until the practicing and jam on the ferry. Low pressure setting. Am quietly grateful to the live performers I've been lucky enough to see in the past five years. They got me interested in guitar, which I don't play well but compose on. They also introduced me to the mandolin, which is a lovely instrument to travel with and a very comfortable and less expensive than the violin, which I grew up playing. Mandolin also is better received-- people don't associate it with classical music. I don't see myself as a bluegrass player, really, but one of the gents on the ferry suggested I come to the festival in Kodiak next summer. It's certainly a thought-- I'd learn a lot and I love Alaska's coast. When it's sunny!

August 31, 2009 Western Montana

~ Savor the Flavor ~

*There is a world of busy doings
I've stepped outside of for the nonce
to sup the precious flow of river thyme
spiced by scent of today sublime
gently rolling pace and thoughts
green growing and immediate
bark of fox, call of thrush
smell of loam, cold water's rush
pine tang and taste of impending rain
haunting calls of loons floating
aware of time but unappalled
no boiling despair at dust to dust
years rolling on, going well
life sweet, sufficient in itself
fullness of the present moment
Savoring the flavor of each course
Live Now-- No time to be lost.*

Montana has lovely rivers and trees.

In Libby I had a bathroom emergency and a close encounter with a wolf spider in the loo, causing me to lock in the keys. Have found a campground with showers and will practice and sleep. Am at Logan lake, which should be ideal for kayaking in the morning. Then I'm heading for Glacier National Park. Then to mom's place in Michigan via Route 2. Need to check online tomorrow and see if there are ferries still running between Minnesota and the Upper Peninsula. If they are, I'm excited because I'll see many things I wanted to see. If not, I'll have to adjust my

route again. It would, however, be cheaper to drive than ferry. I am below the level of bank I wanted to go without a job. So that's something to consider as well.

Kayaked on Lake Logan and Thompson-- turtles! Great water clarity. Brown (spade and spaghetti shaped), red (bottle brush) and green algae. Fry and mature biggies-- bluegill, I think. Showered and shaved and changed and am much happier with life. Time to be making my way back to WI, then closing out the apartment and getting a new job in Oregon or Colorado. I have wanted to relocate for a long while but worry about moving far from mom and grandmother. Wrote a little song last night and played covers of some of my favorites.

This morning I saw a man riding his bike down the road shirtless with a cowboy hat on. This part of the states is a bit different than the one I'm accustomed to! Grin. My heart doesn't hurt as much as it did, but I would cheerfully pull my heart out, run it over a few times, and leave it dead on the side of the road.

I want to focus on recording music, which means my next challenge (post income) will be to get my studio equipment working. Purchased when I had a full time job and good income, it's been sitting abandoned while I tried unsuccessfully to balance marriage, home maintenance, and my nursing career. Perhaps my newfound freedom is the opportunity to return to creative work . I also want to kayak the Aleutians next summer, which will take some planning. Time to be back on the road.

Montana looks very much like the golden rolling hills of Wyoming once I leave the Northwestern portion of the state. But for now, I am in a country of clear rushing river and exposed rock. Water tumbles down the canyon toward me, spreading between rocky banks and bouncing off walls. White spray covers sheets of choppy green water. The echoes of rushing stream bound down the canyon toward me, and by the time I have made my way down beside it the pounding is deafening. Upstream people are wading and swimming. I wade happily, watching the sun dipping behind mountains further upstream.

There are sturgeon and trout unique to this area, and fishermen are dotted about stalking them. A hanging bridge crosses the stream about half a mile down, and I can hear the delighted shrieking of kids playing on the suspension as it swings high above the water. Their energy makes me smile as I pick my way slowly back downstream and climb the switchbacks back to the highway. I pass a family making their slow way up the steel grid steps over the ravine. Daughter and mom and dad, frail and elderly. Each step a small victory. Bound to see tumbling water gilded as sun sets behind the peaks. The pit toilets near the road reek, but my upset

stomach compels me. I find my way through a few more casino-dominated towns scattered along the highway before the next Bathroom Emergency.

The first thing I do when I finally get home weeks later is evict the wildlife from my shower. It seems the spiders had a party in there while I was gone. And I grew up with someone who refused to kill them, so I could probably win an America's funniest home videos for how silly I look rounding them up in a cup and dumping them out the side door of the apartment. But it isn't my first ridiculous spider escapade on the trip. Stopping for a bathroom emergency in Montana, I pull rapidly into a gas station and convenience store. The clerk hands me a key and gives me directions to the rest room, which I expect to be the usual very basic or thoroughly nasty filling station pit stop. It's lovely-- wood paneling and a wicker basket containing soap and lotions. It smells nice and is immaculately clean. I am doing my thing and looking around appreciatively when I spot it.

The largest wolf spider I have seen in my life has just crawled out of a hole in the paneling, and is making its way across the floor toward my immobilized self. I had no idea it was possible to pee that fast. I'm done and have my pants back up in 30 seconds flat. The spider, in the meantime, has become disoriented and is wondering around in circles in the middle of the restroom floor between me and the door. It's almost impossible not to feel sorry for the poor thing-- it looks bewildered.

I flush, wash my hands, and grab a couple paper towels with which to herd it toward the door. It doesn't work-- spooked, the spider begins to run in every OTHER direction. After a frustrating moment or two, I do succeed in getting both myself and the eight-legged intruder headed toward daylight. It finally decides to hitch a ride on the paper toweling, which I pick up as I open the door. It sees freedom and leaps for it-- straight at my hand. I shriek, releasing the door and dropping the paper towels. Which leaves me outside the bathroom with the key locked inside.

The spider crawls away, to be seen nevermore. The male gas station attendant looks from my face to the paper towels I am picking up to the locked bathroom door and manages not to laugh. "We have a spare," he reassures me as I try the locked door and look apologetic. I go in and explain the situation to the considerably less amused lady behind the cash register. And buy a couple drinks to make up for the trouble I seem to find just by being. The drinks cool me off as I drive away. And somewhere, there is another generation of direction-challenged wolf spiders who owe their existence to my bleeding heart tendencies!

Glacier National Park-- co-run among Canadians, Americans, and Native Indian Tribes

Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park extreme beauty--- high and deep

Homeward Bound-- Plains

~ Uncivilized ~

Wage slaves working to improve

sometimes can only lose

as brown-nosing lunatics

reap benefits

while dreamers starve

or die young

of corporate horror

Placid ingenuity

beyond her

contentious fight or flighter,

confrontational, embattled

irascible, productive, social

calls and hauls off

sanity's grappling hook

sliding on the slick tin roof

that repels the downpour of

insanity's siren's call

obscenely appealing

lay back, relax, no longer struggle

submit to your broken role

roll over, be steamrolled, devalued, pigeonholed

cease worn out insistence on independence
Let us help and control
accept predestined aspirations and potential
unhealthy to question status quo
Indomitable repression
Oscillating attitudes
of blame or forgiveness
generosity of intent or vitriolic resentment
Entitlement of some, not all
to enjoy the fruit of labors
Wealth sups upon it while vilifying welfare
Lunatic seriousness
Blind junk pile lives
meaninglessly acquired, transpired, required
to cleanse from befuddled conscience
theories of intelligent existence
plausible insistence-- this is how Life is
murderously competent indifference
played off against each other to prevent
change's advent
Worn out lint trap civilization
cannot grow, cannot protect,
can't even clean up its own mess.

There are times when I am down. Unemployment is still high. Food pantries are running on low or empty. I'm personally worried that I won't be able to take care of myself or my loved ones. And I miss the affection and satisfaction of having a lover. I'd like to be held tenderly and wanted. To know how strong my partner is and still feel safe. Not looking to be a conquest or conqueror. Have managed to

keep my Soul and my clothes thus far, holding out for the right one and the right time. Will continue that way. It's hard. I want someone real for a real relationship one day. Letting them close isn't going to be easy. The uncertainty of my life now makes things difficult in many ways. But even if everything in my life is a steady routine and steady income, there are no real guarantees. Am just going to take it day by day and try to enjoy.

I think my husband fell in love with someone else during our last two or three years together. And that maybe I did the same. And that giving your time and enthusiasm to someone else is adulterous, regardless of what physically happens. Which makes me look at love as fickle again-- how can one control such capricious thoughts and feelings. But then I think about choices. The times we fought to keep going, stay focused. Some of the good things we did for each other, our accomplishments. None of my marriage was wasted time. I think we just both changed in different ways at different rates. And that trying to accommodate became a sad way of life for both of us. Love shouldn't be that way.

Now I Think about how to love without giving up me. Seeking enthusiastic mutual participation and caring. Need to know I can be open and vulnerable and be cherished rather than used or abandoned or hurt. The whole one night stand biker fantasy thing was simply a way to avoid having to deal with the morning after, I think. I'd rather spend it in bed after a mutually satisfactory romp and a good night's sleep. Make love. Get up and make breakfast together. Clean up and smile and do whatever we want to do-- together or apart-- next. Never seeing the guy again would suck. But I don't want him moving in. Or to move in with him. Breathing space...

Some elements of that fantasy bear consideration the next time I actually want somebody. Mood music. Gentle lighting. Clean, comfortable, safe surroundings. I would love to make love in the desert or on the beach, but I don't think I'd want that the first time. A lockable door would be nice. So it would have to be a cabin, at least. RV or houseboat, maybe. Something nicer than a tent, van, blanket or the back of my pickup. Wild Child and Mild Lady warily agree. Some sense of care and preparation and beauty. It's all coming back down to knowing someone for more than a day. Easy I apparently will never be. Sexually spontaneous would be delightful, but I also don't want to end up stuck with bad memories or STDs. I want to like how the man I'm with really is. Essentially, the question I am having a hard time getting past when considering another relationship is, "What is he up to when I'm not watching?" I need a lover I can trust and who can be open and loving enough with me that I feel we know and understand each other. And that that is a good thing. I wonder, cynically, how long I will wait before this miracle

happens. I add it to the list of things in life beyond my control and just take each day as it comes. And I smile much more often than I used to.

September 3, 2009 Wisconsin and Upper Peninsula, MI

It's Fall. Time for me to head back to the Midwest and make more decisions that will affect the course of my life in the coming years.

~ Autumn ~

Spring forward, fall back

Breathless with excitement

milkweed pod groupings

waiting...waiting... POP !!!!

Ripened stalks

golden grasses tall

seeds rustle

leaves yellow and brown

wither and fall

Silky seeds dance

brisk offshore breeze blown

Bumble bee harvest--

hurry hurry!

Clinging

to wind-tossed goldenrod seas

Spot of orange on purple aster

majestic monarch migration southward

big surf foams

sound of World

breath of Fall

jostles

crisp piled leaves

stirs nesting instincts

rouses recipes and dreams

of cider, pie and pumpkin seeds

time to leap

into life's next season

The 6 weeks of travel has finally caught up with me. I am exhausted. Annoyed someone in an RV so badly last night at Maple Lake that they left in a huff. They could simply have asked me to stop! I played mandolin for about an hour at around 7 in the evening. Not amplified. Surprised they even heard me through the trees and underbrush. They were several sites away.



Walked the iron bridge path in Bayfield, WI. So pretty! Fall is here. There's a coolness in the air and the trees have bright red limbs amid the green. Their canopies shake down showers of party-colored leaves when the breeze teases branches into sway.

Stopped to have oil changed. The squeak goes on, but the brakes are fine. I'm camped at Red Rock awaiting delivery of a seal to Frenchie's body shop tomorrow morning. Wild riverbank winds near the road, but there is no sign of runoff or erosion or overdevelopment. The water is cold, fast-flowing, as clear as pristine air, and has a musical sound. Hiked upstream about a mile then sat quietly near a big log jam, watching an emerald hummingbird feed on huge orange touch-me-not clumps. So beautiful!!!!

Dug out some clean clothes and got cleaned up. Washed hair from gallon jugs and sponge bathed in the truck with the windows blacked out. Refilled water supply at the hand pump. Am ridiculously worn out. Can't decide if I should do laundry tomorrow while the truck is in the shop or just go to the library and play on the net.

If there are plug-ins at the Laundromat and my wireless cooperates, I can probably accomplish both at once. What I cannot do is take 4 loads of laundry to my mom's. I didn't even do that in college.

I sleep, buy breakfast at the bakery, drop the laundry off at the Laundromat, then take the truck to the garage. There are plug-ins, so I walk back to the Laundromat with the laptop. Pick the truck up, load the finished laundry, and hit the road a few hours later. The guys at Frenchies did well-- the fluids are topped off, tires inflated properly, oil clean, and-- NO SQUEAK! Hooray!!!!!!

Am so glad to be back in forest and river country. No way I can possibly stay in Milwaukee after all I have felt and seen. Will stay with mom, apply for jobs, and close out my little apartment in my hometown. My family is not happy with the idea of me moving far away, and my grandmother's health worries me. Have been out of nursing for nearly a year, and have no desire to get thrown in over my head in ER or critical care, even if they will hire me. Travel nurse jobs are few and far between in the current economy, even for nurses with far more and more recent experience. The economic prospects aren't great. Yet I am without regrets. I thank God for all the blessings and experiences and things I have learned in my travels. And ask for help figuring out what to do next.

Washburne, WI charms me in a much quieter way than does Bayfield. Bayfield's high end Victorian nostalgia, beautifully upscale boutiques and lovingly woodworked chapels is a pretentious step up from Washburne's ironworking roots. I stop at the Apostle Islands kayaking adventure outpost to talk about day trips available. They are winding down for the season, but kindly fill me in on future opportunities. I recommend them to several friends in months to come simply because they took the time to talk to me even though it was clear it wouldn't pay immediate dividends.

Awesome Frenchie's Auto Repair-- 115 W Bayfield St Washburn, WI 54891 715-373-5301 gives my truck honest, fast, polite expert service. The mechanic I ask to do my oil change is friendly, efficient, and blessedly practical. I tell him the squeak goes on and ask if he has time to take a look. He says no, as it is past 3pm and he wants to go home to his family. But he's cheerful about the oil change, and I feel I have left my little red chariot in safe hands as I step across the highway to buy an early dinner at the bakery. They have vegetarian delights. I seize a hummus sandwich with gluttonous excitement, grab a bottled drink, and head for the public beach. A couple who remind me uncannily of online acquaintances are swimming there already when I arrive. His bright hair and her wry wit make me smile.

This is dog walker's paradise, and I am greeted by a big-footed puppy at play and several friendly territory stakers as I walk the paths. Their people are nice. In the antique shop where I stop to buy my mom a Lake Superior polished rock, they have the most beautiful egg-shaped agates I've seen. I help the owner and her grandson move a clothes rack out to the street, and exclaim in delight over her collection of crafts and memorabilia.

But by the time I return at 4:30 to pick up the truck post oil change, they have popped the rear brakes off and found nothing wrong with them. They have, however, located a leaking seal that must be replaced unless I plan on walking back to my mom's house in Michigan. He offers to order the part and put it on in the morning. We make an appointment, and I go find myself a camping spot. My mom and I laugh, during my check-in call, because the park I have pulled off the map is either very optimistically or very ominously named "Valhalla." I'm not ready for a glorious heaven yet. I'm enjoying my life too much. So I'm not terribly upset when I find a pretty little campsite near a river a mile outside of town. I leave the truck backed in, slide into the aqua socks, and go wading upstream. The road isn't far away, but the banks and woods are undeveloped. Soon I am working my way upstream along a deer trail through incredibly lush undergrowth. Five or six types of mushrooms, Solomon's seal, an abundance of berries, wild apples and fallen trees decorate the forest floor beneath a mixed deciduous canopy.

I pause after a mile or so and settle beside the fast, shallow stream. And there he finds me, that tiny emerald emissary of wonder. The hummingbird sees me, but feeds methodically on the bright orange blossoms of touch me not rooted in fallen logs in the rushing water. He sips delicately, drinking his fill and moving systematically over each plant. I don't realize I've been holding my breath until he's done and gone. 10 minutes of magic. And then I work my way back along the deer path, wade across the shockingly cold and beautifully clear water, climb the steep bank, and collapse gratefully into the truck. I don't have the energy to put the tent up. Nor do I feel quite comfortable-- there are about 20 RVs across the road and a trout fisherman gutting his catch a few campsites down. I sleep soundly, deliver the truck to the auto body shop, and do laundry while the necessary repair is done. And then I'm rolling toward Michigan once again.

Epilogue--

~ Lilies ~

We are not Lilies of the field

To toil and spin is what is real.

Success attained is surely sweet

But there are other goals to meet.

If what you have should fall away

Can you stand up, rich, and say

In toiling you did more than duty

In spinning, you created beauty.

I am thinking about productivity and who reaps the benefit of my effort. My nursing license is valid, but I have been out of the field for a year and have reservations about returning to it. The health care debate is raging, and it angers me to hear people say that access to good health care is not a right. In a developed country, it should be, especially for children. It's one thing to tell an adult who has some control over their own decisions and situations that they must find and pay for health insurance. It's another to deny life-saving or enhancing care to a child because they are poor. Medicare, Medicaid and Family Care are not enough. In America's for-profit system, services are commonly denied to patients because they are not reimbursable. I see preventive screenings, dental, and follow-up care never offered or sought because it is expensive. I get no satisfaction from pinballing people around when allowable time insurers cover at care facilities is up.

And yet, there are parts of nursing I love. I like being useful. The blessing of patient care is seeing the real difference made in the lives of individuals helped. And I learn so very much from their strength and love and grace. The curse of my profession is the paperwork, the constant staff shortages, the preventable suffering caused by a system that does not provide services that promote well being, rather than just treating conditions.

I decide to look into nursing, writing, environmental science, and guide/park ranger jobs.

Closing out WI apartment, move to mom's with literally everything I own in the back of the pickup. Now I know how the folks in covered wagons felt. Only I don't have people trying to exterminate me on the way to mom's. And I know I am welcome there.

I apply for my Michigan nursing license. And wait. When it comes, I apply for part time and per diem home care, hospice, hospital and clinical nursing jobs near my mom's home. And wait. I try not to get discouraged. I keep believing I have much to offer and learn, and will find the right setting to do well. I become interested in health promotion, education and public health as ways to change life for the better for many, rather than only the few I can personally help. I take a Red Cross CPR instructor's course and sign up to teach classes. I think seriously about what other organizations I want to work for, if the Peace Corps is not an option, or when I return from serving after 27 months.

Red Cross. AmeriCorps. United Way. Green entrepreneurs, such as those developing alternatives to fossil fuels. National Parks. I think about what sort of business I would run if I wanted to start my own business. It would combine nature, environment, and health care. I watch the great political debate over the public insurance option and wonder how a country that is so rich can allow people to go sick, homeless, or hungry. IF we should have affordable health insurance and care options shouldn't even be up for debate.

HOW is the relevant question. I watch Sick Around the World by _____Reid_____ on PBS, listen to a feature on end of life planning in LaCrosse, WI by Shapiro on NPR, and realize that some places have figured it all out. So, as with food, it's actually a question of distribution. We need to spread factual information and explore options rather than segregation, misinformation and fear. Lessons the road trip taught that are being reinforced over and over. I think about grad school, listen to the troubles PhDs are having finding gainful employment, and decide not to take on the additional debt. I want to apply the knowledge I have in a useful way to help people who need it.

I learn that I do prefer rural areas, even though I grew up in the city. And that even though I am not a serious athlete, I do alright. That I enjoy physically strenuous and challenging activities, provided that I have the right equipment and training before attempting them. And now I will have the confidence when I have the money to go horseback riding again, and try out glider, parasail, windsurf and hang gliding.

Sense of continuity between history and future, of peoples moving across the land-
- deserted Native American and changing contemporary cities

For the first time in memory, I spend a Christmas with friends and family that is not cut short by work. This I consider a priority, because I may not be home for holidays in the coming years. The Peace Corps application process takes up to 9 months. Term of service is 27 months. It isn't certain how often I'll be able to come home or communicate while serving, because electricity and travel options available vary widely by location. Until I even know if I'm accepted, I will certainly have to do something to meet my financial obligations-- can't afford to be a woman of leisure until next June!

But I am reluctant to commit to a full time position, nor do I want anyone investing training in me when I plan to leave the country if the Peace corps invites me to join. I streamline and consolidate expenses. Belt tighten. Begin writing articles for money. And I get by. Creative projects left in the dust by the grind of a 40+ hour workweek and home upkeep when I was married begin getting done. I begin networking with spoken and written word artists online. I write the story of my road trip down, hoping someone else will want to read it. I eat and sleep better than I have in months. And, once again, I am a valued part of a family. I have more than enough.

What did I learn from this trip? I learned to smile even when it pours. People never stay the same, and you never know where anyone is from or what they've been through by where you find them. A few kind words can carry me for thousands of miles. How a person dresses isn't who they are. Hormones and love will never be predictable.

Impressions of a country I am proud to call mine. Awareness of fallibility-- my own, particularly. I have written my issues and fears into the ground. Now I want to celebrate the fact that I love my family, that nature makes me high, that life is full of possibilities. I want to keep my life streamlined and my overhead and physical and mental and emotional baggage minimal. I am healthy, but the lack of health insurance frightens me because it could be catastrophic for my family. I ensure my living will and POA are current before leaving, and begin looking around for an individual health insurance plan that will provide coverage in case of emergency.

I miss the sun and the smells and the diversity of travel, but not the driving or fatigue.

State and county parks camping vs. national

I learn to trust my instincts.

Mom and I are talking about the trip over supper one night. I'm still fuming about Canadian Customs in Blaine, WA. She smiles and tells me that my great grandmother was Canadian. I pause, mid-rant. And then start to laugh. I may still not particularly like authority, but I can't blame Canadians for their nationalism without incriminating myself. Mom has a way of reminding me that, as a Cherokee Prayer sates, we are all part of a "human family." We may disagree. But our humanity-- in all its frailty, idiocy and splendor-- is a commonality we cannot escape

The aftermath of divorce and journey of self discovery is not always pretty. Loneliness and depression and spite travel with me some days. Others are filled with uncomplicated joy. Eventually, loneliness and self pity give way to gratitude for the quiet goodness of days and peace that solitude brings. "Love is not leaning" is the phrase I carry with me from a favorite poem called "A Few Words of Comfort." I find them true and wise. And life is now about becoming rather than maintaining or struggling or battering against realities I will never change. I become accustomed to my own company, comfortable enough in my own skin that I can gladly be with people again. I stop looking for that special man and simply look for the direction needed to grow and thrive in the present. I stop hurting over the past and the loves I lost, stop hovering on the sharp-edged precipice above the abyss of loneliness. And life is good again in the present tense.

My mind stops trying to reconcile the pragmatist and the mystic, attempting to force them to march lockstep. It is enough that they find balance and happiness, that the body they inhabit is well. I begin again to pursue my creative projects, as well as develop new practical and coping skills. And I accept the lessons and places to which my decisions, failure, and triumphs have brought me. I learn to value more deeply my self and the sustaining relationships in my life. I learn also not to dwell on loss or focus on tomorrows that may not come.

When I dwell in possibility, it is only to remind myself what gives me hope and inspiration. Most days, I am content. Because the Peace Corps may take me out of the country for over 2 years, I've made a conscious decision to focus on getting my ducks in a row and not get romantically involved. My life is now about focusing on what I CAN do and who will return my love in a way that brings joy to all involved. I'm much happier, communicating with and supporting my loved ones better. There's more love in my life, less romance.

And yet I suspect that one day the timing will be right and I will be flying confidently solo, managing well on my own. And then life will turn another corner and I'll pause on my journey because I have recognized a warm pair of eyes surrounded by laugh lines. Inside me there will reawaken the mystic memory of a

quiet desert night spent fully present, overwhelmingly alive in good company.
Once more there will be a dream of we. And my time of solo moto will have gone by.

Trip Tune List--

Love Drunk Now I'm Sober

Casino- Trust Yourself

Dolores Riordan No Baggage

Music Box Dancer

Just Wants to Say Goodbye Joey and Rory

Fight Like a Girl-- Bombshell

Down a River of Time -- oboe

Love a Little Stronger-- Diamond Rio

"Unsalted"-- Surf Lake Superior

"All I Want To Do Is Shelter You"

"Be Your Own Girl"

Walking Her Home-- Mark Shultz

Amazing-- Solas "No one's getting medals here for acts of bravery"

Everywhere You Go-- Sean Mullins

It's Never Enough-- Theory of a Dead Man

Sounds Like Life-- Daryl Whorley

Lucky-- Colby Callet and Jason Mraz

Love and Sex and Magic -- Cierra

Wildflowers-- Tom Petty

Nickel Creek

Artists

Chickadee Paintings by Fullmer 719-783-2424

Kennan Ward photography www.kennanward.com

Flowing horse paintings Jody Bergsma Leanintree.com

The Ranting Raven www.trailriver.com

www.inhawe.com

“Murphy’s Law” beaver with tree dropped on him

Beautiful Native American child Autumn Reflections by Karen Noles www.toh-atingallery.com

Bear chewing on grass print “Spring greens” Tedi Rankin tedirankin@gmail.com

Roughcut Creations chainsaw carvings by Eric Berson www.bersonart.com

Best staining I have ever seen on wood art except for native totem poles

Planned Route with Points of Interest:

Wisconsin

Minnesota

South Dakota -- Badlands, Mt Rushmore, Wind Cave, Jewel Cave

Wyoming - Kemmerer (Fossil Butte), Bighorn Canyon, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, Flamingo Gorge, Medicine Wheel

Colorado - Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Cache La Poudre River (kayaking), Colorado National Monument, Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument, Rocky Mountains National Park , Great Sand Dunes

New Mexico - Carlsbad Caverns, El Morro?, Petroglyph NM? Santa Fe, Albuquerque (hot air balloon) , White Sands NM

Texas-- Guadalupe Mountains

Arizona-- Glen Canyon NRA, Navajo National Monument or Montezuma or Tonto (Sonora) or Turzigoot or Walnut Canyon, old Spanish historical trail, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Petrified Forest NM

western California - Death Valley, Devils Postpile, Kings Canyon, Yosemite? (been there)

Nevada - Great Basin, Death Valley, Wild Horse Management Area

Utah - Timpanogos Cave NM, Zion, Bryce canyon, Cedar breaks, Glen Canyon, Arches, Unitas

Idaho - Craters of the Moon

Oregon - Hell's Canyon, southwest

Washington - Mt Rainier, North Cascades, Spokane

British Columbia -- Queen Charlotte Islands, up 97/coast

Alaska - Denali, Cape Krusenstern, Glacier Bay, Katmai, Kobuk Valley, Lake Clark, NOATAK, Yukon-Charley?

Yukon Territory

British Columbia - down 93/inland)

Montana - Bighorn Canyon (wild horses) , Glacier NP, Yellowstone, Missouri River national wildlife reserve

North Dakota -Teddy Roosevelt

Canada- lakes Winnepeg, Manitoba, north shore Lake Superior

Michigan- mom's house

Ferry back to WI

Actual Route-- WI-MN-ND-SD-CO-NM-TX-AZ-NV-UT-CO- WY-ID- WA-BC-YT-AK-YK-Ferry-WA-OR-ID-MT-ND-MN-WI-Upper Peninsula MI - WI

Changes due to cool stuff I saw on the way, weather, finance, and my experiences in BC.

Tucked

Lakota Sioux Wind Cave

Lions and Buffalo and Bear, oh my!

