



LOST LUGGAGE: TRAVELS WITH MY MOTHER

Jan Frey Rendleman

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of English Language and Literature

Central Michigan University  
Mount Pleasant, Michigan  
October 2011

Accepted by the Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies,  
Central Michigan University, in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the master's degree

Thesis Committee:

Susan Schiller, Ph.D.

Committee Chair

Steven Bailey, Ph.D.

Faculty Member

Jeffrey Bean, M.F.A.

Faculty Member

October 14, 2011

Date of Defense

Roger Coles, Ph.D.

Dean  
College of Graduate Studies

October 28, 2011

Approved by the  
College of Graduate Studies

Copyright by  
Jan Frey Rendleman  
2011

This memoir is dedicated to  
Charlotte Johanna Frey Hockman  
1920-2011

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the members of the ad hoc Thesis Requirements Committee: Dr. Susan A. Schiller, Dr. Steven Bailey, and Jeffrey Bean. Dr. Schiller first introduced me to creative non-fiction, and it was her innovative final exam that inspired me to first write about my trips to Europe with my mother. Jeffrey Bean further fueled my growing appreciation for this genre in his meticulously organized class in writing creative non-fiction that brooked no procrastination nor shoddy writing assignments. Dr. Bailey, although new to Central Michigan University, very kindly stepped in to complete my committee and brought his own extensive association with travel writing to the mix.

The faculty and staff of Central Michigan University's Department of English Language and Literature – the administrative staff, my advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Brockman, and all the faculty members I encountered during my studies – were knowledgeable, inspiring, and welcoming. For me, as a non-traditional student, their kindness and support have been invaluable.

## ABSTRACT

### LOST LUGGAGE: TRAVELS WITH MY MOTHER

by Jan Frey Rendleman

Mother/daughter relationships can be complex, frustrating, rewarding, and permanently scaring. This piece of creative non-fiction is a reflection on the evolution of the author's relationship with her mother during five trips to Europe during the summers of 1997 through 2001. The trips to London, Paris, Scotland, Northern Europe, and Italy are presented chronologically and braided with strands of reminiscence of their earlier family life together and apart. These reflections establish the character of the two travelers and illuminate the larger question of how upbringing affects both internal and external relationships as the two protagonists interact, or fail to connect, with the places they visit and people they meet. The personal narrative is bookended with a look at their final journey together as the mother lies dying in hospice. While the piece is ostensibly nonfiction of place written from the outsider's point of view, the overriding emphasis is on memoir and more exactly on metaphorical memory. It examines why these particular memories resonate with the author, how they have become the metaphors of her life. This self-questioning of meaning helps to firm and shape her understanding of the changing roles her mother has played in her life. The result is a sometimes funny, often touching look at two individuals who, despite many phobias, flaws, and poor social skills, still manage to help each other grow and expand beyond their expectations. In this mother/daughter relationship, dependencies shift, needs change, and rounder, fuller characters emerge as each protective cocoon is discarded and new colorations are tried for both camouflage and revelation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: BAY CITY, MICHIGAN, FEBRUARY 20, 2011 ..... viii

CHAPTER

I. LONDON, JUNE 1997..... 1

II. PARIS, JUNE 1998 .....27

III. SCOTLAND, JUNE 1999 .....43

IV. NORTHERN EUROPE, JUNE 2000 .....63

V. ITALY, JULY 2001 .....83

EPILOGUE: BAY CITY, MICHIGAN, FEBRUARY 25, 2011 ..... 105

## PROLOGUE

BAY CITY, MICHIGAN, FEBRUARY 20, 2011

Not much to unpack this time, a single change of clothes, two silk flower arrangements, three stuffed animals (very soft, the way you like them), and the photos. I put your favorite picture of Dad on the white table under the large window. I turn it so I'm sure you can see it. The photo that Carl took of the whole group of us I place on the book shelves by the closet. The toys and the flowers I arrange around the room, so you'll see something familiar no matter which way they turn you on the bed.

It's a nice room. A bit over-done on the cottage-by-the-lake theme, but it's very clean, neat, and large. I wouldn't have put up the small patchwork quilt of the sail boat with button accents. Dad would be very angry at the lack of proper rigging. I can hear him saying that the mast would never stay up with so few ropes to hold it. It would bother him every time he came in the room. Perhaps it's best he's not here to see it. At least the large picture above the built-in seat/bed that the nurse said we are free to sleep on is of a lighthouse. You'll like that. It's on a rocky shore looking out over the ocean. Just two months ago, when you were in the hospital with the bladder infection, you kept asking Carl and me to turn your face toward the ocean. You didn't seem to understand when we told you the ocean you grew up by in New Jersey was nowhere near your hospital bed here in Bay City, Michigan.

I look around the room. The white polar bear that Andy sent you last Christmas is missing. There's nothing left to unpack so I must have left it at the nursing home. Maybe they'll bring it over with you.

I go over to the window and look out. It's a Monday in February and there is snow everywhere. There's a nice bench and a path outside your window. I wonder how many hospice

patients actually get to use that bench. It's probably more for the families. Here at Brian's House they have lots of small places, cozy spaces with couches and pillows, little wombs where family members can go and whisper and cry.

In a flurry of winter coats, blankets, straps, cold metal, and wheels, you are here. You look so very small on that gurney. The EMS men comment on how light you are, less than 90 pounds now. They are gentle and talk to you as they get you onto the bed.

"There you go, Hon."

"See, your daughter's here waiting for you."

"Here's your rabbit. It's so soft." They've brought that stuffed white rabbit that just turned up in your room over Christmas. No one knows where it came from or who brought it. No sign of the white bear Andy gave you.

"Can someone get another pillow to prop up her arm?"

"Here use this one," I say, handing him the small gold pillow you used to put behind you on the kitchen chair to help with the pain in your back. "It's the right size."

They tuck you in and hustle out to their next transfer. Hospital to nursing home, nursing home to hospice. The circle of life.

"Hi, Mom, it's Jan. I'm here. Are you warm enough? I can get you more blankets."

You are shivering. Violently. Your whole body is shaking. I pull up the quilt and tuck it in around you.

"Are you cold, Mom?" No response. You keep staring at me. No blinking. No words. Just your dark eyes wide open.

I go out and talk to the nurse at the desk. I ask if they have any of those lovely warmed blankets that are even warmer than fresh out of the dryer. The ones that make you feel safe and cocooned. She says she'll bring some right over.

You are still shaking. We wrap you in the cottony warmth. You are still shaking. We take off those blankets as they cool and get ready to wrap you in another layer of warmth. As we remove the cooled blankets I see your right arm, the only part of you still able to move. You have your fist clenched around the thin material of your hospital gown. Your arm is straight and stiff with effort as you tighten your grip so hard your entire body is shaking with the effort. Your right hand clenched against the inevitable.

I stroke your right arm. "Mom, it's OK. You can relax now. I'm here. You're safe. You can relax now."

It takes several hours before you do, and then it's probably from sheer exhaustion. Your eyes are still open and staring at me. It's very quiet in the room, but not in my head. I don't know why, but I keep talking to you in my mind. I've been doing this for several months now. I can't bring myself to tell you what's really going on. You're in hospice now. They say you only have a few days left. I can say it in my mind but not out loud. I know you can read it in my eyes.

Carl stops by after work. I'm relieved to see him. We have been relying on each other over the past ten months to make all the hard decisions about your care. Decisions no children should ever have to make for their parent. We joke about how much Dad would have hated the button-strewn picture of the sailboat. I show him where the pillows and blankets are under the seat/bed, point out how I unpacked and put the photos around. Mention that the white bear from Andy is lost. He talks to me. He gives you a kiss, says "Hi Mom," but he talks to me. We get one of the warm cookies they keep in the kitchen. I cry. It seems like I'm always crying. Carl

makes me go back to your house just a few blocks away to get some sleep. I kiss you good night and tell you I'll be back in the morning.

It's Tuesday, and I'm here alone again. Danny had to go back home on Sunday to look after the cats and arrange for our cat sitter to come for the next few days. Carl is at work. His boss is less understanding than mine. Mine lost her mother just three months ago. It's been a hard winter on mothers in my office.

The white bear has turned up. It's sitting on your bed when I come in.

"Look, Mom, it's the bear Andy sent you for Christmas. I thought I lost it when I packed up your things. Someone must have found it."

You are on your left side, and I sit down to show it to you.

"See, Mom? It's so soft. Andy knows how you like soft stuffed animals. You used to buy him the softest ones you could find when we would go out Christmas shopping for the kids. We would stand there and rub them against our cheeks. Do you remember?"

Your eyes are open and staring. They have you on morphine because of the pain in your back. Lots of morphine. I don't know if you can understand me. Your eyes are fixed, but not empty. They seem desperate to me, as if you want to remember every line of my face. I rub the bear across your cheek. No response.

The room gets very quiet. I don't know what to say to you. We stare at each across a widening gulf. I finally get up and get my backpack. I've brought along some reading and a bottle of water. I rummage through it for a magazine but can't find one for all the paperwork I have stuffed in there. I start to pull things out, admitting papers, a list of your belongings, brochures, half-eaten bags of snacks, a notebook filled with doctor's instructions, and I set them on the bed. There's plenty of room. You're so small. I look over at you.

“Do you remember that family going back to India that we saw in the old international terminal at Detroit Metro? It was when we were checking in for our first trip to Europe, and they were in the line in front of us. They had all that baggage. Remember? Huge suitcases held together with rope and those straps like Dad used to use on the boat. The ones with the buckles that you threaded the strap through. Those things were always so hard to get undone. Everyone in that group – and there were at least four adults plus teenagers and small children – had a large suitcase plus shopping bags full of loose stuff. Remember the ticket clerk told them they were way over the weight limit on their luggage. They couldn’t even pay extra to get it all on. The clerk kept telling them that if they let them take it all, there wouldn’t be room for anyone else’s luggage. So they all left the line, remember? And they hauled all their baggage to the center of the terminal.

By the time we had our tickets and were checked in, that family had all their bags open and were making piles of things they could leave behind. They were trying to make decisions about clothes and toys in the middle of the terminal. I remember looking back from the escalator as we headed for our gate. They were pulling things out until there was this huge pile of clothes. It looked like those pictures of the clothes at Auschwitz. Shoes and coats and pants all left behind. No one had cell phones back then, so I don’t know what they did with all their things. Probably just left them there. ”

I shake my head and look around your room at the two photos, the five stuffed animals, and two silk flower arrangements. You are still staring at me.

Do you remember that first trip to London, Mom? Do you remember the four trips to Europe after that? Do you remember? Please say you remember. I need you to remember.

CHAPTER I

LONDON, JUNE 1997

**lug** /lʌ g/verb. Infl. **-gg-**. **LME**.

[Prob. of Scandinavian origin: cf. Swedish *lugga* pull a person's hair & **LUG** noun<sup>2</sup>.]

**1** *verb trans. gen.* Pull, give a pull to; pull *by* the ear, hair, etc.; *fig.* tease, worry, bait.

**2** *verb trans.* Pull along with violent effort; drag, tug (something heavy). Also, carry with difficulty (something heavy) *around* or *about* with one. **LME**

**luggage** /'lʌ gidʒ / noun. **L16**.

[from **LUG** *verb* + **-AGE**, after *baggage*.]

**1** Orig., what has to be lugged about; inconveniently heavy baggage. Now (*sing.* & (*rare*) in *pl.*), the baggage of a traveler or passenger; also the baggage of an army. **L16**.

**2** Bags, suitcases, etc., designed to hold the belongings of a traveler or passenger.

**E20**

*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition

By the time we touched down in London, I was lucky to have any hair left at all. I had been running my fingers through my hair for several hours. Now it was starting to come out in alarmingly large quantities.

The first four hours of the flight from Detroit hadn't been too bad. I still had a few pages of the *Sky Mall* magazine left to look at, but I had read the entire *NWA World Traveler* including the ads. I always bring a book, but I'm never able to read it on the plane. I need something light and easily discarded. Mom and I had done four-hour flights before, but this was going on five and we still had three more hours to go. Of course it didn't help that we had been so worried about missing the plane that we got to Detroit Metro Airport at noon, and our plane didn't leave for London until seven in the evening. So now we had been on high alert for over twelve hours since we had worried our way through check in, smiling nervously as we showed our passports. As the airline's ticketing clerk had looked from my mother's passport to her face, Mom had eyed her photo trying to strike the same wide-eyed, frightened pose she had been caught in by the passport photographer. She did a fair impression. The clerk looked at our tickets and asked if we realized that our flight didn't leave until seven that evening. I smiled weakly and told her we wanted to be sure we got here in time. The clerk shook her head, handed us our tickets, and we picked up our carry-on luggage. The clerk's tone had worried Mom as we turned and started toward the escalators.

She looked up at me squaring her shoulders. "At least we're in the right place," she said firmly.

"Yes, we are," I smiled back. "We have plenty of time. Not like those poor people from India trying to sort out their luggage problems in front of everyone."

Mom opened her purse and put her passport in the interior zippered compartment. I did the same with my passport and purse.

OK," she said, starting off at a fast pace for a 77 year old. "Where's our gate?"

We had decided on carry-on luggage only. Neither of us had ever been out of the country before, and we were both too afraid of being clothes-less in a strange land to trust our belongings to the airline. We started packing over a month ago, weighing the versatility of each piece against its weight and bulkiness. A beige sweater would go with anything. Jeans were great for not wrinkling but might be too informal for London. A good pair of walking shoes was a must and a single pair of black leather shoes for evening, if needed. We had done well. Our bags were full and heavy, but we could carry them. Not many bags had wheels back in 1997. We had padded shoulder straps, and we both knew how to shoulder a load.

After the flight to India left, we had the terminal to ourselves for a few hours. Finally, with only two hours to go until departure, the more rational passengers for our flight were beginning to trickle in. They staked out seats and spilled their baggage and children about the waiting area. Mom and I had our nests firmly constructed, with carry-on bags and our new brightly colored jackets marking our territory. The firm set to my mother's mouth was often enough to make the newcomers realize that, although sitting next to us might put them closer to the departure gate, perhaps that seat over there was just as convenient.

There seemed to be an unusually large number of families in this group. Father, mother, and siblings would all be hovering around a single young teen in a blue polo shirt. On the shirt was the white logo of an arts camp in Michigan. It soon became apparent that in these less secure pre-9/11 days, these families were all at the gate waiting to see their teens off on a European arts tour.

By one hour to take-off, we were bobbing in a sea of blue shirts. Slowly the waters began to drift apart as the sensible parents remained close to the gate with the younger children, and the blue-shirted teens, sensing imminent freedom, drifted into pools of girls and boys on the opposite

side of the waiting area. Occasionally a parent would call a teen to the no-man's land between to remind them of some detail. Rolling his or her eyes, a single drop of blue would break off from the main, talk to the parent and then quickly return to be absorbed into the roiling masses. The girls would laugh and giggle behind their hands. The boys would talk together earnestly and suddenly laugh, making the girls look over and giggle even more. They were all bubbling over with excitement, the idea of freedom from parental control making it impossible for them to sit still.

Suddenly, the adults who would be accompanying the group moved to the open space and began to make loud announcements – Get your bags together! Have your passport and boarding pass out! Get ready to line up for boarding!

A stillness filled the room. The two groups froze and looked at each other across the rows of seats. The teens looked very young and very frightened. The parents stopped talking among themselves and younger siblings were picking up on the change in mood. One young girl began to cry, and the two groups melded back into one amid tears and hugs and hearty handshakes from fathers to sons.

Mom and I watched the little dramas unfold as we checked on our important documents again and gathered up our luggage and matching brightly colored jackets. London was large and filled with strangers. We didn't want to lose each other in the crowds. A father helped release his son from his wife's tight hug and walked him over to the ticket line talking earnestly in the boy's ear. The son looked back at his mother who tried a small wave and only succeeded in raising her hand a bit, then dabbing at her eyes. One teen was rocking back and forth as her mother ran her hand across the girl's hair again and again.

As the rows were called for boarding, one by one a blue shirt left a family group behind. Mothers, fathers, and remaining children, even some grandparents, went over to the huge walls of glass to get a last glimpse of the plane. Our row was called. Mom and I took deep breaths, squared our shoulders, and held our important documents firmly in our hands. We were finally on our way, together.

I left my mother for the first time about six months before I was to start Kindergarten. That may seem odd to those of the generation now on our plane to London. But in the 1950's and early 60's, it was common. Mom had three children and stayed home. Dad worked from 8 to 5 and was home on weekends. We were never left with a sitter. If something had to be done, my sister, brother, and I went along, and we behaved.

My older sister, Lynne, was finishing first grade at the time of the Great Nursery School Experiment. She loved school. To her, it was freedom. To me, it was terror. Mom must have known this because about six months before I was to start school, she and Dad decided that I would go to a local nursery school three mornings a week. My next door neighbor, Stevie Richmond, was going, too. Mom dressed me up, packed me a small bag of special toys, and took both of us to a lovely building with an indoor play set the likes of which Stevie and I had only seen in our dreams. It was all polished wood with swings and slides and jungle gyms and surrounded by sand. I couldn't wait to try it all out, until my mother turned and left. She left. She was gone. The door had closed behind her. My ears felt hot and the sound of kids playing was having trouble finding my ear drums. My next memory is of sitting on a counter in the kitchen area crying wildly while strangers called my mother to come and get me. I had been alone for all of 20 minutes. Alone with a room full of other children and the Play Set of the Gods, but no Mom.

She was sleeping now. Her skin looked oddly transparent in the cabin light. Her head was tilted back and mouth slightly open. The in-flight movie was done and we had begun our descent into Heathrow Airport. I looked down at my *Sky Mall* magazine. There was enough hair in it to make a small kitten.

“Mom, we’re getting ready to land.”

“I wasn’t really asleep.”

“Of course you weren’t. Do you want to keep the bag of peanuts they gave you while you weren’t sleeping?”

“Yes, you never know when you might want some peanuts.” She tucked them away in her carry-on with the small bag of cookies left over from the dinner service.

The blue-shirted teens in the row behind us had been well behaved throughout the eight hour flight. Now the girl in the aisle seat was saying, “Can you see anything? I wish we could see some of London besides the airport.”

As we all looked out the window, suddenly the clouds parted to reveal the iconic bend in the Thames, the bridges, and the Houses of Parliament.

“Look down there!” I pointed. “That’s the Thames and the big building there is the Houses of Parliament with Big Ben.” Mom was straining across me and the kids behind were looking out their window. It was just there for a few seconds. Then the clouds closed in again. But it was a perfect glimpse of the London that Mom and I were hoping to see.

Because we carried our bags with us, we were able to bypass the luggage claim and made it quickly through the passport check and customs. Our next hurdle was finding our tour company representative. We were doing an independent tour, but our transportation from airport to hotel and back and a half day tour of the city were included. Mom was on the lookout for the

red jacket we had been told to look for. Sure enough there she was, all smiles and hustle ready to whisk the lot of us off to our various lodgings.

Our hotel was just off Bayswater Road that runs along the north edge of Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park. It was Saturday morning and there were vendors' stalls set up along the sidewalk outside the lovely high wrought iron railings that outline the park. Artists and antique dealers were selling their wares to tourists and most of the vendors had at least a few horse brasses. Mom and I love British mysteries. From Agatha Christie to Dorothy Sayers, we relish a good English murder. In most there is a pub with horse brasses. We didn't have a clue what they were used for, but they often were described as small round brass ornaments that people collected fanatically.

"Look, Mom, see?" I practically yelled, reduced to Dick and Jane speak as the bus sped by the stalls. "See? Over there. And there! Look! See?"

"Horse brasses," my mother smiled. It was the first smile she had managed since we got in the car back in Michigan. "Horse brasses."

And so we pulled up in front of our hotel as London traffic swirled around us and black London taxis queued up to drop off people at the brass plated front doors. The building was old, red brick, and looked charming. A doorman in livery opened the doors for us, and we struggled in, carrying our suitcases and clutching our important documents. Our tour representative took us up to the desk, made sure our reservation was in order, and reminded us that we had a meeting at 6 that evening to go over the next day's sightseeing tour and the list of optional excursions. We were both exhausted.

It's not the big differences that astonish and disorient you on a foreign trip. You expect those. Cars driving on the wrong side of the street, people speaking strange languages, and eating

things you wouldn't feed your cat, that's what international travel is all about. It's the little differences that startle and eventually wear you out and make you homesick. Our first real shock was our room. British novels often talk of children being put to sleep on their cots. I always thought that was just a quaint British term for a bed. The room was only big enough to hold two tiny cots. Smaller than a twin bed, but sturdier than a camping cot, it was certainly going to be cozy. I opened the curtain to our view of the air conditioning system and looked over at Mom. She was looking very small and tired and every one of her seventy-seven years.

"Well, we won't be spending much time in here anyway," I reassured her.

"That's true," she answered, looking into the bathroom at the small bathtub. What the tub lacked in length it made up for in height. Mom is only five feet tall, and the side of the tub came up above her knees.

"Will you help me get in and out?"

"Sure. We'll know each other very well before this trip is over."

It's a good thing we were very much alike in temperament and odd quirks because despite forty-five years of acquaintance, I really didn't know my mother at all. I know she taught me how to iron. She taught me how to properly clean a bathroom using a Kleenex dipped in vinegar on the bright chrome to bring up the shine. She made flour and water paste so my sister and I could make papier-mâché bowls by lining the inside of empty chicken pot pie tins with strips of wet newspaper. She must have called us to breakfast, lunch, and dinner thousands of times, but I can't hear her voice. In my childish self-centeredness, I turned off the volume. I can see the heavy old Sunbeam iron and feel my frustration when I couldn't make a perfect crease in my father's handkerchiefs. I can smell the bleach in the Comet we would sprinkle in the toilet bowl. I can feel the coolness of the flour and water paste as I dip in another strip of newspaper

and run it between two fingers to dislodge any large lumps of the gooey milkiness. But I have little memory of her voice when I remember my childhood.

Mom lived in the shadow of my father. It wasn't that she was some timid little housewife. She was the one that kept the books and knew where every penny was spent. She cooked three meals a day, every day, cleaned and "did for us" as the British say. But the house was decorated the way Dad liked it. Excursions on weekends were to check out boats that Dad was interested in. When we went on our two-week vacation up to the lake each year, our cabin had a kitchenette so Mom's routine was little changed. She went on doing for us and we all blithely took it for granted. To be honest, it wasn't her I missed when she left the nursery school, it was the security and recognized routine she represented.

We didn't bother to unpack our suitcases. There wasn't space in the confines of our room. We would stack our bags together in one corner and put them on top of our beds during the day. Our luggage was lugged daily.

After a short nap in our cots that weren't nearly as uncomfortable as they looked, we were both eager to leave our little room as quickly as possible. We still had several hours before our meeting that evening so we headed across Bayswater Road and into Kensington Gardens.

According to Frommer's *London Day-by-Day* that Mom and I had studied for the past six months, Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park cover 351 acres in the heart of London. In 1536, Henry VIII decided the monks of Westminster Abbey didn't need this wild forest to the west of the city as much as he needed his own private hunting preserve. Thanks to Henry's love of the hunt, today Londoners flock to this lovely greensward now completely encircled by greater London. It's really two parks, Hyde Park to the east that's more open and grassy and Kensington Gardens to the west with its lovely old trees, the Round Pond, and Kensington Palace where

Queen Victoria was born and Princess Diana lived before and after her divorce. We entered by Marlborough Gate at the center of the north side where the two parks meet.

We stopped a few feet in to admire the Italian Gardens, a group of four fountains surrounded by pigeons and people sitting on benches. Pigeons that looked just like the pigeons in Michigan, and people that looked just like anyone you would see in a park in the states. My first real emotion in London, after the exhaustion wore off, was disappointment. It didn't even smell different. The temperature was about the same as it had been when we left Detroit. No one wore a bowler hat, carried an umbrella, or walked an English bulldog. It was ordinary. But Mom and I had planned and honed this trip for over a year, and I wasn't about to let her down.

I turned to Mom and managed a semi-enthusiastic smile.

“Well, here we are in London! We made it.”

She looked a bit shell shocked. I was about to ask her if she felt OK when I saw a strange little man in a tweed jacket mincing his way toward us. He looked oddly lumpy. As he got closer, I noticed that he had several white bags stuffed in his pockets and had another in his hand. He would take something out of the bag and feed it to one of the twenty or more squirrels that perched on his hat, his shoulders, his arms, clung to his pants, and ran around his feet. Every now and then the man would stop and scold one of the squirrels for not sharing then continue on his way.

We both smiled. Yes, it's the little things that surprise you.

Life at our house when I grew up was not full of surprises. There was a definite calculated sameness to each day. Breakfast was at 6:00, lunch was at noon, dinner at 5:30 followed by homework and TV during the school year and playtime and TV during the summer. Bedtime was at 9:00, finally 10:00 when I was in high school. Mealtimes were set in stone. If we

went up to the lake, we brought the red plaid zippered bag with a thermos of coffee and a thermos of milk. In the brown metal cooler were sandwiches and cookies for us and two sandwiches for Dad, one peanut butter and jelly and one with lunch meat, both on whole wheat. The same lunch he ate every day of the week. We had to take it with us, because we were leaving home and there was no way to be sure we could find a place to eat and be served by noon. We had to eat at noon. Dad was a type-one diabetic.

I knew what diabetes was at a very young age. It was a syringe full of a clear liquid injected into your thigh and worrying about food. Later, I found out that at medical school, Dad had become violently ill with some kind of virus and after that his body could no longer make the insulin that it needed to process food. Every morning he would inject himself with insulin and then eat strictly-regulated meals to use it all up before he woke up in the morning to begin the routine again. The only way my mother could cope with the restrictions was the way she coped with everything in her life. She created a routine that we all followed with a religious fervor. Dad ate, Lynne whined about the strict schedule, my little brother Carl, when he came along, would watch the syringe wide-eyed, Mom worried, and I was her designated helper. If Dad was just a little late coming home from work, Mom would send me to the living room window to watch for his car. She would stay by the stove, trying to keep dinner from burning or drying out and call to me every few minutes.

“Do you see him yet?”

I would pick up on the urgency in her voice and yell back, “Not yet!”

The tension would rise until finally I would see his car round the bend in the street and head for the driveway. I’d run back to the kitchen to tell Mom and everything would return to normal. The blessed routine.

After I got married, my husband suggested that we just have soup for dinner. I couldn't understand this concept at all. Dinner was a recognizable meat, a starch and a vegetable – not soup. I worried about that for a very long time. Mom had taught me well.

Mom and I walked through Kensington Park, following our map toward the palace. People were walking dogs, biking, and having picnics on the grass. Around the Round Pond, the breeze was blowing the canvas seats in the sling chairs into billowing spinnakers that seemed to point toward the crowd gathered by the pond. There were toy boats everywhere. But these weren't toys for children. In fact, all the children looked bored and either napped on the ground or tormented their siblings. These were working model boats with some of the sailboats taller than their owners. On the water there was a four-masted barquentine and several lovely smaller sailboats with main sails and jibs set to catch the wind. There was even a Chinese junk with a black lacquered hull and bright red sails. In their midst was a battleship with fore and aft gun turrets that must have been over seven feet long.

We stood to the side looking them all over. Our favorite was a small gaff-rigged schooner with exquisite lines. Dad would have loved it, but he was gone now.

After Dad died in 1988, Mom suddenly bloomed into this... person. It took about a year. First she took down one of the ship paintings in the bedroom and replaced it with a framed Art Deco Erté poster of a woman walking her wolfhound. Then another ship came out of the living room, and a Monet print appeared. She gave me her old car and bought an Audi she promptly named Hans. But most astounding of all, she began to speak, and I began to listen.

When I was quite young, I was looking at pictures in an art book in my father's library. Tucked inside were five or six beautifully rendered charcoal drawings of Roman statues that were in the book. Each had been carefully preserved with a translucent cover sheet. The shading

was exquisite, making the figures look three dimensional. I took them to my mother and asked where they came from. She took them from me and said she had drawn them a long time ago. I never saw them again even though I searched through many of the art books to try and show them to my sister. I soon forgot all about them until my mother told me a story as we sat on a bench in Kensington Gardens watching grown men fuss over toy boats in the Round Pond.

When she was in high school in New Jersey, Mom would take the train into New York City to work as an accountant for a designer dress manufacturer. She had taken art classes in school and it was here she found that one teacher who became her inspiration. She decided to save her money and go to art school in New York.

Her father made a good living servicing the grand automobiles owned by the rich families in Asbury Park. Her step-mother ran a laundry in the same complex behind their house. She would do hundreds of sheets a week for the many guests in the same mansions. But after the stock market crashed in 1929 so did the fortunes of the rich in Asbury Park. Business dried up and in 1938, the year Mom graduated from high school, her parents were forced to use her art school money to pay the taxes on their house and businesses. Mom was devastated. Her sister, Ellen, had just graduated with honors from Columbia and was heading to Duke University on a scholarship to earn her master's degree. Mom was sent along to worry about the essentials. She was the one who set up a routine, made sure my aunt ate occasionally, and even washed her hair for her when she would become so wrapped up in her studies that she would forget to take care of her appearance. Mom worked in the Duke library in the rare book room. She loved the order there, going down into the stacks to find books for students, occasionally encountering the huge North Carolina cockroaches that loved to eat the glue in the binding. It was at Duke that she

would meet and marry my father, a handsome young medical student. The closest she would ever come to art school was when she helped me pay for my BFA.

Kensington Palace is a working palace, home to several of the current royals. Some of the rooms in the north wing have been made into a museum full of household items from the time of Queen Victoria, including royal china, household books, and several fabulous old dresses. The embroidery and fabric is now so delicate that they are shown in air conditioned glass cases in small dark rooms to protect the colors. There were several of us on the tour and it was getting very close indeed. Mom was holding my hand quite tightly in the dark. When we exited, I was going on about how tall and narrow all the rooms were and how they would have had much more room for their money if they had just tipped the whole castle over on its side so that the tall walls would become large floors and the narrow ceilings would become the walls. Mom walked quickly over to a bench in front of a row of tall shaped evergreens. I looked at my map.

“That building over there is the Orangery,” I said pointing at a lovely white building with tall glass windows. “We could get some lunch over there.”

“Let’s sit a bit,” Mom said.

I was always happy to study my maps, so we sat quietly for a few minutes until we were approached by a middle aged couple.

“You tourists, too?” the man asked in a broad Australian accent.

“Yes, we are,” I answered. “From America.”

“Thought so,” he said. “My wife and I have been here for six weeks looking at the place where my father came from. Taking in the sights.”

“Six weeks,” I said and looked over at Mom. She had her jaw set and looked like she wished they would go away. I had never met an Australian so I kept up the conversation. “We just got here this morning. Did the Palace tour.”

“Oh, you should have tea in the Orangery,” the wife chimed in. “It’s lovely and the cakes are sinful.” We talked a bit about how Australians often come over to England for at least six weeks. It’s such a long trip they like to make it worth their while. I said Americans were lucky to get a one-week vacation, and we just had to cram everything in.

Mom still hadn’t said anything. The set of her jaw was worrying the wife, and she hustled her husband off after a few more pleasantries. As they turned the corner past the row of yew trees, Mom turned to her right and threw up over the arm of the bench. At least it was a neat single blow instead of a protracted bout of gasps and gags. All her red blood cells had retreated to her core and a fine cold sweat covered her white face. I rummaged through my purse for Kleenex and said stupid things like “Are you alright?” and “Can I get you a drink?” My mind was racing trying to remember what the trip brochure had said about medical emergencies.

“It’s alright. Let’s just get back to the hotel.” Mom tried a weak little smile. “It was just too hot and close in the Palace.”

We walked back at a slow pace. I got Mom a Coke and we took another nap on our cots. Our trip to London was off to a great start.

That any of we three children would ever talk to strangers had never been a worry for our parents. Talking to anyone was never one of our strong suits. Lynne was a bit more outgoing, but Carl and I were the quiet ones in the back of the classroom who prayed we would make it through the day without being noticed. We both hoped for a test day. Then we didn’t have to interact with anyone. Mom was the same. Dad was even worse, and he was a doctor. I don’t

know how he made it through each day. We were all terrified of being wrong, or worse, doing something wrong. We lived in a state of constant anxiety and embarrassment.

Mom was feeling better in the morning so we took the half-day sightseeing tour of the city on Sunday, then spent some time exploring the neighborhood around our hotel. We had hoped to find a real English Tea Shoppe and have a lovely tea with scones and crumpets. It didn't exist. All we found were "lardy cakes" and that the British idea of cake flour was very coarsely ground indeed.

On Monday, bright and early, we had our free continental breakfast (a hard roll with jelly and a cup of tea), set out to tackle the London transit system, and visit the British Museum. We made it as far as the upper level of the underground. Yes, there was that iconic map of the different lines and there were the complicated-looking machines that dispense the tickets. People were swarming past to head down to the trains.

In Michigan, we have cars. If you want to go somewhere, you get in your car and drive there. This whole public transit thing was way outside my comfort zone. The stairs down to the trains looked like a descent into Hell. Everyone knew what to do except me.

It was kindergarten all over again. Despite tears and pleading, Mom had walked me the half a block to school. Yes, I could see my house from the playground. Yes, I often played on the swings behind the building. Yes, I wanted to learn how to read. And no, I didn't want to go. It was different. It was chaotic. It wasn't home. Mom took me in and sat me down at a long table. She gave me a kiss and set a brown peg board in front of me to distract me while she left. In the center of the table was a bin with small wooden houses, little green wooden fir trees, and brightly colored wooden flowers. I watched the other kids reach in the bucket and start making little neighborhoods by putting the little pegs on the bottom of the houses into their peg boards. I kept

my head down so they wouldn't see me crying and reached for a small house. While I tried to get the little peg on the bottom into a little hole on my board, a mother sat her crying daughter across from me.

“See,” she said straightening the little girl's dress and putting a peg board in front of her, “that little girl isn't crying.”

That was my first lesson in school. When you are scared, just keep your head down and pretend you're enjoying yourself.

Now Mom was standing next to me in the London Underground looking at the bewildering array of trains we had to choose from. She looked at me expectantly. I couldn't do it. I had read all the booklets on the London transit system but absolute panic gripped me. I turned and looked out at the sunlight. I put my head down, and looked at my map of London with all the bus routes.

“Let's try the buses, instead,” I said, trying to sound confident. “I know there are buses that go right past the museum.”

After several tries we found the right corner with the right bus going in the right direction and waited. We made it onto the rear of the double-decker bus and a tall and distinguished looking man in an immaculate Sikh outfit of turban, long white jacket with colorful sash, and tight white pants took our fare. We weren't in Michigan anymore.

We were such innocents. We didn't even have a clue where or how to get off the bus. When we could see the museum, Mom tried to get off the bus at the stop light about half a block away. A nice young man in a leather jacket and Mohawk haircut helped me stop her from stepping off the slowly moving bus. He very kindly showed us how it was done.

Nothing had prepared me for the British Museum. I had pored over guide books, knew which way to turn for the Elgin Marbles and the Assyrian rooms, but the first thing we saw when we came in was Egypt. Huge and majestic, the plunder of the past two centuries was spread before us. All that was missing was the sand and the heat. Huge red marble heads over twenty feet high, whole walls of temples filled with hieroglyphics, Ka statues of men and women who had been seated beside each other for thousands of years looked as new as the day they were carved. Mom and I ooh'd and ahh'd our way around the vast hall, looking at small fragile clay bottles with miniature heads of Anubis next to small wooden dioramas of everyday life next to massive granite sarcophagi that held the nesting coffins with the mummy itself as the prize in the center.

Egypt was only the beginning. The entrance to the Assyrian rooms was flanked by the two huge statues of winged lions with the heads of men that once guarded the entrance to the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. This led to a long narrow room where the walls were covered with the intricate hunting scenes from the palace itself. Done in exquisite bas relief, the lion hunt features one of my favorite scenes, the dying lioness. Ashurnasirpal and his hunters are seen chasing her in their chariots. They catch up with her. In the final panel, several arrows pierce her hide and every muscle in her body strains to rise one last time before she dies. The agony on her face stuck in my throat. I had studied all this in art history and here it was, ripped from its original setting, but still intact and here for me to see.

The most disappointing of the rooms was next – the Elgin Marbles. The destruction was massive. Heads and arms were missing on the huge pediments that once adorned the triangular area at the ends of the roof. The metopes, where once centaurs battled men, are now only the bodies of horses and fragments of men. The story can only be guessed from what little remains.

Even the friezes that showed the procession of contemporary Athenians have been broken into so many fragments there is no longer the sense of continuity and grandeur. It is a sad testament to greed.

We spent the whole day at the museum. Lunch was in the dark old cafeteria that is now gone, replaced by a high ceilinged bistro. Next to us a woman and her grandson were spending the day together. From their conversation, we could tell that they came to the museum often to have lunch and look at the Roman exhibits. The boy had a book on the hoards of Roman gold that ordinary people would occasionally find in their gardens in Britain. He was showing his grandmother pictures of gold coins and jewelry. It was obvious that although Grandma was hoping to expand his mind, he was just interested in knowing what to look for when he got back home to his mother's gardens.

Routines are very hard to break, especially when they have been ingrained since childhood. For my older sister, Lynne, younger brother, Carl, and I, leaving home became breaking away. There just was no other way to get free.

My sister wanted to go off to school and study art. It was decided she would go to Miami University in Ohio. The only problem was she had fallen in love with a young man in high school and he was going to Berkeley. She attended a year in Ohio, came home for summer break and tried to convince Mom and Dad that she should go to Berkeley. They weren't having it. So she ran away. Reunited with the love of her life, they promptly broke up, but Lynne had tasted freedom and with great determination managed to put herself through college and earned her master's degree in composition and rhetoric at Berkeley. This was the seventies so there were drugs and protests and narrow escapes, but in the end she did it. Mom cried for months after she left and tried to get her to come back home. Truthfully, Mom and Lynne had never gotten along.

Mom was order and routine. Lynne wanted adventure and experiment. Yes, Mom wanted her back but it was more like a missing puzzle piece, a jagged hole that spoiled the symmetry. It took years before the vast gulf between them could at least be shouted across.

I was supposed to go to college and become a teacher. It had been decided long ago. The only problem was that I wasn't at all good with other people. They scared me, and I was tired of keeping my head down and pretending. But I was also the good girl, the middle child who never rocked the boat. Lynne was the rebel, Carl was the baby, and me, I just wanted to make things quietly in my room. I had been taught well. The world was scary. It tried to upset your schedule and make you late for dinner. So instead of going off to college on my own, I eloped with the first boy who asked me. I thought we would start our own stable little family. Set up our own routines and I would get to try sex, that forbidden unknown that good girls didn't participate in until they were married. We moved eighteen times in twenty four years. He lied and cheated and in the end, I called my mother to come and go to the lawyer with me. She hadn't a clue what had been going on. She didn't know that nine years earlier I had packed up my two kids and headed to her house to try and get away, but the unknowns made me stop and bear the ills I knew. But now I was worn out and didn't want to keep my head down and pretend any more.

At nineteen, my brother got his girlfriend pregnant. They were married a month before the baby was born. He tried working at Chevrolet where my father was the doctor, but he was harassed by the men on the line, disappeared for a few days, and came home to move his young family into my parents' house where a new routine was set up to accommodate them. He wouldn't break away again for fifteen years.

My parents weren't evil. They were caring and wanted what was best for us. What was best for us was what fit into their lives, not ours. They were just impossible to leave gradually.

There had to be a sudden and cataclysmic severing of ties. That rigidity of theirs was unforgiving and would never bend, only break.

That evening, despite very sore feet, Mom and I signed up for a sightseeing trip to Stonehenge and Bath the next day. For us, this was a major breakthrough. We hadn't researched the route. We didn't know what to expect, but we were going. Neither of us slept much that night.

In the morning, we ate our roll and downed our tea and were the first in line for the bus. We had a special guide who spent the entire trip to Stonehenge telling us the story of its construction. As the never ending succession of Aubrey holes, bluestones, and sarsen stones droned on, both Mom and I dozed as the city slipped away and we entered the rolling farmland southwest of London. We were wondering how much farther it could be, after all we were on an island, when suddenly there it was. Just like all the pictures we had ever seen, two concentric rings of massive stones, out in the open surrounded by small hills and cows. The clever Brits had even tucked the entrance and inevitable gift shop underground so it didn't spoil the view.

The stones were huge and gray, their tops slightly dusted with lichen. The grass all around was immaculate. Someone must trim around all of the fallen stones by hand. All the stories the guide had told us did not do it justice. To understand the immensity of this earthwork you only have to look at the top of one of the tallest remaining upright stones. Its partner has fallen as has the stone that sat as a lintel atop the two. The top eighteen inches or so of the tall boulder have been hewn away to leave this half moon shaped knob right in the center. Each one of the huge stones in the inner and outer rings had the same knob cut into the top. This is what held the lintel stones in place. Not only did these primitive people somehow set these stones upright and then put another cap stone between these standing stones, but they fitted holes on the

bottom of the cap stones to the knobs on the top of the standing stones. The precision required was astounding and to me very appealing

Both my parents were perfectionists. Whatever was done had to be done right. That sort of mentality is very limiting. The amount of time you have to put into research to do anything perfectly is enormous, so you begin to settle for routines. Things that have worked before will work well again.

It also tends to make you impatient. You know that only you can do it to your own standards, so you better get started now. This would be the source of many problems for my mother. In May of 1972, my grandparents were coming over. Mom couldn't wait until my brother got home from school to have him cut the lawn so it would look perfect when they arrived the next day. She got out the riding mower and started on the lawn. The sun was shining, and she was thinking through the menu. In the back yard, she put the mower in neutral while she got off to empty the bag of the grass clippings. The motor was humming loudly, and there was just enough vibration that the mower shifted into gear as she walked in front of it. It leapt forward knocking her down and slicing out the center of her left foot like scooping out a melon. Her toes and heel remained but the flesh that should have connected the two was gone except for a thin strip of muscle and bone along the outer edge of her foot. She was in the hospital for months.

Years later, she couldn't wait for her grandson to come over the next day to help her bring a heavy old metal dehumidifier up from the basement. She could do it. She bumped it up the steps one at a time until the casters got caught on the lip of the top step. She gave it one big jerk to get it loose and crushed three vertebrae in her back. Sometimes a stubborn will to get the

job done is not in your best interest. I'm sure many of those ancients who had a hand or arm in the wrong place as the stones were set would have agreed.

It seemed somehow sacrilegious to buy any of the trinkets in the gift shop at Stonehenge. Mom and I looked at a few of the books and then headed back to the bus. Our next stop was Bath, named for the Roman baths that were built there over the first 300 years of the Christian era. We toured the baths and marveled at the intricate mosaic work the Romans had left behind. The main bath itself was green with algae and we both agreed didn't look all that inviting. What did sound good was lunch. We went in search of a local tea shop and found only "lardy cakes" and odd coarse-looking breads, so we settled for a couple of cucumber sandwiches and thought about how misleading all those Agatha Christie books had been. The tea was good and we both sat and people watched. A couple was having an argument at a nearby table.

"You know, your father had an affair," Mom said, looking at the angry couple.

I was stunned.

"Twice," she said.

She still hadn't looked at me.

"Lynne said I should tell you so you wouldn't think your father was such a perfect man," she went on, finally turning her head to me.

My father cheated on my mother. My head was spinning. My father. If anyone lived by the knightly code it was him, and now I was learning that he cheated on my mother.

"The last time was when I was pregnant with your brother. He came to me and asked if I would mind if he had an affair."

"What did you say?" I stammered.

"I asked him not to leave us until after the baby was born."

I looked at her. “I was eight, Lynne was ten, and you were pregnant with Carl, and Dad asked you if it was OK if he had an affair?”

“Oh, he never would have really left us,” she reassured me. “He had an affair before when we were just married and he was doing his internship in Cincinnati. Your Grandpa came down and talked to him and he broke it off. We were fine for years after that until that other woman came along. She called the house once. She had an ugly voice. Very harsh and nasty.”

“So what did you do?” I asked.

“Oh, he realized it was wrong, and I let him buy his first boat. Once he got the boats, he never had another affair.”

It was all too surreal. Sitting in a café in the ancient city of Bath and finding out some very personal history I had never known about. It was typical that Lynne would have wanted Mom to tell me about this after she found out. Dad’s perfectionism drove her crazy. She was determined to make him fail at something even if it was her. So she tried drugs, protested everything he believed in and finally ran away. Lynne’s finest hour had been when she got Dad so mad at dinner one evening that they both stood up. He yelled at her while walking through the kitchen, the hallway, and laundry room with her back-peddling in front of him the whole way. Finally her back was against the wall and there was nowhere left to go. Mom got Dad’s attention telling him he had to come back and finish his dinner. Lynne went upstairs. I’m sure she was smirking.

The thing was that I knew he wasn’t perfect. I had seen his first attempt at carving an eagle to hang over the fireplace. It looked like a goose. He always kept it even when his second attempt, after several months of research on eagles and two years of carving, was a masterpiece. I had seen how hard he took it if he couldn’t save a man’s hand that had been mangled in the

machines at the GM plant where he was the physician. I knew it hurt him when each of us left. He was demanding but he demanded even more of himself.

The strange thing to me was Mom's reaction to all this. She lived for him, kept him alive with her schedules and timetables, and he wanted something on the side. He didn't want to leave her, just wanted the sex and more than that, wanted Mom to agree to it. I wonder if his little sweetie knew just where she fit in his plans. I wondered if he was chafing just as much as we did under Mom's rigid schedules. Like me he wanted to play on the play set, but he didn't want to lose the ordered security that was Mom.

Our last excursion before heading home was to Hampton Court Palace, Henry VIII's home just outside London. It was a huge and rambling red-brick castle set up as a museum. There were life-size mannequins in the massive and primitive kitchens showing how men, women, bread, meat, vegetables, sewage, and dogs all sweated together in front of the big ovens. Upstairs the great halls were a world apart from what was happening under their feet. We visited the Chapel Royal where Henry first learned that his fifth wife Catherine Howard was cheating on him. It is said her ghost still roams the hall outside the chapel begging for her life. It did her no good. It was in this chapel that Henry would marry his sixth and final wife, the one that would break the cycle, outlive him, and create a new life for herself.

The next morning, after a restless night anticipating all the things we could do wrong while trying to get to the plane, we put our suitcases on our cots for the last time. Our toiletries were packed away and we went down to wait for the tour bus that would take us to the airport. We were early, of course. People came and went in a steady dance as we sat with our baggage and our important documents. An hour and a half later the bus arrived, and we made sure our names were on the driver's clipboard.

The lines at Heathrow were horrendous. Later I would see lines this long again at the most popular rides at Disney World. We weren't as early as we would have liked, but the line was moving and finally we were checked in but with no gate number.

"Just keep an eye on the monitors," the woman told us.

Keep an eye on the monitors! The things cascaded down through row after row of planes headed to the four corners of the earth, paused briefly, then cascaded again. It took several times through the whole list before we found our plane and were able to catch the gate number. We ran for it. I tucked both carry-ons under my arms and told Mom we had to go fast. She put her head down and started walking. In the wrong direction.

"No, Mom, this way. The gate is this way."

She did a quick about face, and we were off. We reached the gate just as they began boarding our section. We managed to get out our important documents, as we kept our bags moving in front of us by pushing them with our feet. Then one last sprint onto the plane, and relief when there was no one sitting in our seats and still room in the overhead bins for our luggage.

Mom and I sat quietly for a few minutes, surrounded by other out-of-breath passengers. We still clutched our important documents in our hands, too winded to put them away.

Mom looked over at me.

"We should do this again next year," she said hesitantly, fearing what the answer might be. I looked over at her then up at the flight attendant who was coming down the aisle to make sure our seats were upright and tray tables in the locked position.

"How about Paris," I asked.

## CHAPTER II

PARIS, JUNE 1998

The nine hour trip to Paris was going to be agony. The seats were arranged in the 3-5-3 pattern, three seats by the window, an aisle, five seats in the middle, an aisle, and three more seats by the opposite windows. Despite getting to the airport six hours early, my seat was the middle one in the center section of five seats. No matter which way I went, there would be two people between me and the aisle. I panicked when I first saw where I was going to sit, stopping in the aisle.

“Jan, you have to sit down. We’re holding up the line,” Mom said prodding the back of my knees with her carry-on bag. “It’ll be fine. Go ahead.” I shifted my own carry-on and started to look for a spot in the overhead bins for both our bags.

It wasn’t going to fine. I was doing better, much better by June of 1998 as we headed to Paris, but I was by no means finished with the agoraphobia that had overwhelmed me in 1986. A reasonable person who knew of my Dad’s perfectionism and my Mom’s strict schedules and how they had collided with the chaotic uncertainty of my life with my own growing family could probably had predicted my descent into madness. It came as a complete surprise to me.

It had started back in August of 1986 when we were moving for the eighteenth time in sixteen years of marriage. My husband, 13 year old daughter, Robin, seven year old son, Andy, and I were all sitting in McDonalds in Grand Rapids eating breakfast. We had an appointment with a bank in Flint about 100 miles across Michigan where we would be signing the papers on our new house. I remember feeling nervous and a bit queasy and deciding that the Egg McMuffin didn’t look all that appetizing. I wrapped up most of it and threw it away as we all finished up, got in the car, and headed east.

We were almost to Lansing, the half way point, when something in me snapped. The rope that tethered my sanity to the dock just suddenly broke. I was adrift with nothing solid to hang on to. My hands flew to my sides to touch the solid seat under me, but it didn't help. I was floating in a black void. The car was spinning, and my sanity wasn't the only thing I lost control of. I had to go to the bathroom. Right now.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I said, my voice sounding muffled in my own hot ears. "I need to go right now."

"There's no place to go here. You'll have to wait until we're in Lansing," my husband responded. I could tell he didn't get it. My insides were about to become my outsides. I was going to explode.

"I need to stop at the first place we find."

"OK," he said, obviously displeased with my distress. He was always displeased when any of us upset his plans.

I looked down at my shoes and sat in silence. I kept repeating, "You're fine. There's nothing wrong. You can make it. Pretend you're someplace else." Deep inside the black empty cavern of what had once been my mind I saw a small man sitting on a wooden chair. He was gripping the edges of the seat until his knuckles were white and sweat was breaking out all over his body. Suddenly, he jumped up and began to run around aimlessly in the vast empty space of my mind. He was crazy and so was I. I began to sob. Not cry, sob. Deep, wrenching, gulping air, sobs that just made the little man run faster and faster. Keeping my head down wasn't going to work this time. I'd done it one time too many, and I knew if I pretended I was someplace else, I might not ever come back.

We made it to a Burger King, and I ran inside. It wasn't pretty, but I made it. I tried to sleep the rest of the way to Flint, but all I really did was close my eyes. I felt that if I went to sleep, I wouldn't wake up the same person.

On the plane to Paris almost 13 years later, I was again talking to myself furiously. "Come on. These people aren't going to stop you from going to the bathroom. You're fine. Everything is fine and nothing is threatening you. Calm down. You're fine." The baggage was stowed, and I pulled a red and white mint out of my purse. After reading everything I could find on agoraphobia I knew the trick was to distract myself. Make the little man concentrate on something concrete so he wouldn't notice that all he had was that single wooden chair to cling to. As I sucked on the mint and smoothed the cellophane wrapper between my fingers, I looked around the plane. No empty seats. So sit down, talk to Mom, get settled and RELAX! Yeah, right.

By the end of the second hour, we had run out of things to say. Everyone around us had been whispered about, the first round of beverages was done, and Mom was getting tired.

The fourth hour came and went. I worked up the courage to ask the two men on my right to allow me out to the restroom. Mom was snoring softly to my left, her head back and mouth open.

By the sixth hour into the flight, I was slowly and deliberately ripping up one of those advertisement cards from the magazine I had brought along. The man next to me had been watching me for the last hour. Maybe he sensed my growing anxiety. Maybe he just didn't want me to throw up on his nice suit. Whatever his reasons, he took pity on me and in broken English he asked if this was my first trip to Paris. I said yes, and he asked where we were staying. I pulled my map of Paris out of my bag and showed him where our hotel was. He said it was a

good location for a first trip to Paris and began to show me how close we would be to the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, and the Pompidou Center. We talked about gardens and museums we should see and he circled them on the map. I often think about that nice Frenchman. I wonder if he realized how he had saved my sanity and his suit.

By the time we landed at Charles DeGaul Airport, my panic attack was down to my usual level of anxiety. After London, Mom and I had felt confident enough to try a country where we didn't speak the language. Six weeks of French in the sixth grade wasn't going to get us very far. The airport did nothing to reassure us. There was a huge hotel that looked like the prow of a ship had crashed through the airport and taken up residence. The moving sidewalks would suddenly take off into space heading up at steep angles to different levels. I was trying to balance Mom and luggage and get us to the nice man who thankfully spoke English and stamped our passports. We finally found our tour lady in the red jacket, were checked off her list, and with luggage placed where we could see it, we were on the way to our hotel. Banners were flying outside the airport and there was a general air of festivity with lots of people wearing national colors and sweaters with soccer emblems on them. No one had told us that the World Cup was being held in Paris while we were there.

Our first hint of the craziness that is soccer occurred as we left our very nice and normal-sized room on the first day to check out the Les Halles shopping center directly behind our hotel. The Les Halles area had been the general wholesale market during the reign of Louis the XVI. According to our guide during the half-day tour the next day, it was from here that the disgruntled proletariat struck out for Louis's summer home, Versailles, and confronted Marie Antoinette who gave her famous "Let them eat cake" speech. If she had held her tongue she might have saved her head. But by 1998, Les Halles had morphed into a vast underground

shopping mall. To enter, there was a long and frightening escalator into the bowels of the earth. Even the roof line at street level curved in toward the abyss creating the sensation of a vortex that would pull us into its maw.

My fear of escalators started when I was five years old. In Flint, Michigan, where I grew up, the banks were downtown in huge old, impressive buildings and filled with old, impressive men in dark suits. Everyone dressed up to go to the bank. At Michigan National, where my parents did their banking, there was a central escalator to go upstairs and talk to your banker. I have no idea why my mother was there that day, but I remember the click of my patent leather shoes on the marble floors and how very tall that escalator seemed to me. The grownups were talking in hushed voices and that always meant be quiet and do as you are told. Mom finished her business and we headed back to the escalator to go home. Somehow in my slippery leather-soled dress shoes, I slid right off the edge of the metal steps of the escalator and fell head first until I finally got so tangled up half way down that it stopped my fall. My dress was up over my head, my elbows and shins were skinned and my screams were still echoing off the marble walls by the time the steps carried me to the bottom. People rushed to help. Mom looked mortified. I could tell she was horribly embarrassed. So was I. I scrambled up. Mom checked me over and thanked everyone for their help. With as much dignity as we could manage, we left through the huge art deco front doors. I have not liked going down escalators ever since.

On that summer day in Paris, Mom and I stood and contemplated the prospect of tackling the three-story descent into Les Halles. I turned to see if there might be an elevator we could take instead. Coming towards us was a fast moving group of Scottish soccer hooligans with kilts flying, matching soccer shirts, and crazy hats flapping as they carried a surfboard over their heads and ran toward the escalator.

“We could come back another day,” Mom said, watching the young men line the surf board up with the moving stairs.

We decided to check out the serpentine iron work of the art nouveau Metro station nearby and leave the unknown depths to the young.

That evening we met with our tour facilitator. This tour, like our first to London, was not a packaged tour with a schedule of different places to see. We had transportation to and from our “centrally located hotel” and a half day tour of the city on the first full day. After that we could book any additional tours we wanted. The tour facilitator had a book filled with side trip options that he spread before us in the lobby. We booked a trip to Monet’s home in Giverny and one to Versailles for later in the week.

The next morning we were up bright and early. I helped Mom high jump in and out of the bath tub.

“Do you think it will be rolls and jelly again,” I asked her. Our complimentary breakfasts in London had been monotonous and scant.

“I hope not,” she answered, drying her hair. “But even if it is, the bread in Paris is wonderful. You honestly will not believe how different it is.” I must have looked skeptical. “Honestly, it is heavenly. Just wait and see.”

Between our two trips, Mom had gone on a very expensive train tour from Paris to Vienna with her friend Polly. Our first trip to London had been a warm up for that trip. They had stayed at fabulous hotels like Le Meurice in Paris and travelled first class on the trains. Still she said she didn’t have as much fun as she did on our trip to London. We like the same things, a good museum, a small restaurant, side trips to places we have seen for years in movies and magazines. Polly likes to shop for clothes. Mom does not.

Breakfast was a considerable improvement on London. I don't understand how something as narrow as the English Channel can separate such wildly different styles of cooking. Mom was right. The bread in Paris is from another planet. There simply is no equivalent on this earth. It has flavor and texture and a smell that makes you ravenously hungry and marvelously content at the same time. Mom and I left the breakfast buffet smiling.

The city tour started at Notre Dame. As my French savior on the plane had mentioned, we weren't more than two blocks and a bridge from the cathedral. The outside of the building was a symphony of ornamentation. If there was a way to add spiky fleurs-de-lis to the edges of spires or the pointed fret work above the Gothic arches of the windows, it was done and done with enthusiasm. Quatrefoils spread their four leaves atop walls and created the outline of smaller stained glass windows. Gargoyles jutted open-mouthed from the walls each seeming to wail in torment with a hideous silence.

Passing through the outer doors with dour angels and saints arching over our heads ready to pounce on the unworthy, we entered into another realm. The sharp warnings of the outer world gave way to the sublime. Dark and cool, lit only by the stained glass windows and a few candles, the glorious sweep of the tall gothic arches lifted our spirits. We had run the gauntlet of the exterior and were rewarded with a lightness and lift that made it hard to believe these arches were made of solid stone. Whether you believe in a God or not, the cathedral is certainly a testament to the glory that man can create when truly inspired.

Paris is full of contradictions like this. Just across the river and a few blocks from Notre Dame is a lovely old building with one of those typically French mansard roofs. Beautiful windows with curved tops and ionic columns jut out from the slanted sides of the roof. Four stories above the front door, surrounded by gold colored ornamentation, is an eight foot tall

picture of Droopy. Yes, Droopy, the white dog with the perpetually depressed face and long floppy jowls from the Hanna Barbera cartoons. I have no idea why, but I have the photo to prove it.

We went on to the Arc de Triomphe which is massive and surrounded by such ferocious traffic that they have underground walkways to get tourists over to it without getting killed.

“Can you get a photo from the bus?” Mom asked, watching the cars careening around the traffic circle.

“Sure,” I answered, taking my camera out. We had the bus to ourselves as our fellow tourists tried to make it across to the base of the arch.

“I like our room. Don’t you?” Mom asked, watching my face.

“It’s great. Real beds and we even have a view of a cathedral instead of air conditioning machinery.”

“They certainly love their cathedrals in Europe.”

“Shall we go to the Louvre tomorrow? We don’t have to see everything. I picked up a flyer at the hotel desk and we can go through it tonight and figure out what we really want to see.” I could see she liked the idea of planning out our trip.

“Let’s do that,” she smiled.

We took a few more photos but stayed on the bus. We got out at the Eiffel Tower. It is the color of cocoa. I had no idea. I always thought it was black. We went up to the second level for some gorgeous views of the city. It was June of 1998 and the tower had a huge lighted sign counting down the days to the millennium, “J-566 avant l’an 2000.” According to the guide book we bought at the base of the tower, they were going to tear it down in 1910 only 21 years after it was built for the 1889 Exposition Universelle. Luckily they discovered it made a great radio

antenna or it would have been a big pile of scrap metal, and Paris would have lost its enduring symbol.

The next day, we spent seven hours at the Louvre. Being punctual Americans of Swedish and Swiss descent we were there when the doors opened. By making our way to the *Mona Lisa* first, we had her all to ourselves for a good fifteen minutes. She didn't disappoint. The reproductions do not do her justice. She's actually quite small, but the life in the infinitesimally subtle layers of oil is beyond comprehension. Her eyes are wet. Her skin has depth and form. She could have taken a breath and not surprised us at all. The wonders continued as we moved from room to room. *The Raft of the Medusa*, Egyptian Ka statues, David's massive *Coronation of Napoleon*, Vermeer's intimate little *Lacemaker* – it was Gardner's *Art through the Ages* come to life.

After seven hours, Mom and I stopped simultaneously. We were at the base of yet another huge marble staircase.

"This leads to the Napoleon rooms," I said looking at the map.

"Napoleon rooms?" Mom asked, looking very small at the base of the massive stairs.

"It says they are the apartments of Napoleon III."

"Napoleon III."

"Yup, up there."

"Jan," Mom said very quietly. "I can't move anymore."

"Neither can I. Let's look at the map and find the closest way out."

Somehow we made it down several interminable hallways to the closest restaurant and sat down, fell down, and couldn't move for at least an hour. We ordered something and ate and

drank. I don't remember what. After another hour, we managed to trudge the two blocks back to the hotel. We both slept soundly that night.

The Orsay was on our list the next morning. After another lovely breakfast, we crossed the Seine and headed for the much smaller and more manageable museum. The Louvre has towering ceilings in every room, 20 feet minimum, but there is nothing light or airy about its massive stone walls. The Orsay is all light and openness. It was originally a train station. The huge central hall still stretches east to west, and you can picture how the trains would have pulled in and out. It was only in 1979 that a design was chosen to change the station into a museum to house art of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, bridging the gap between the Louvre and the Musée National d'Art Modern. They kept the three-story-high glass roof that curves over the central Sculpture Hall, bathing the statues in glorious natural light. There are wide balconies on the second level that look over this central hall. Smaller sculptures are housed here, and it was here that I found my knight.

Mom and I had started on the uppermost level in the side rooms that house the paintings. Here the pastels, my favorite media, were in temperature controlled glass cases. There was no light except for strategically placed diffused spots to highlight each painting. It was skillfully done with enough light to see the individual bold slashes of dust that Degas placed to accent his dancers' skirts, but not enough to damage the fragile chalk paintings. We emerged from the pastel rooms like moles, squinting and blinking in the light only to see the incredibly eye-achingly harsh oranges, reds, and pinks of the room filled with Gauguin's Polynesian oils. They are playful at the Orsay.

After several more rooms we emerged onto the Seine Terrace, the internal balcony that looks over the central hall and runs along the north side of the building. Mom was tired and sat

for a few minutes on one of the benches that form the railing of the balcony. In front of her were two tall black pillars about two feet square and eight feet tall. On the top of each pillar was a little statue. I've forgotten what was on top of the one, but the other held a small white statue of a knight on horseback. I circled the pillar to try to see him better. The pedestal was so high his base was way over my head and at best I could make out the body of a weary looking armor-clad horse, all four feet on the ground barely trudging slowly forward. The knight on his back was in full armor too, struggling to hold his sword blade upright in front of his breastplate.

I had to see more. His face was very difficult to make out and I tried to stand on the bench next to Mom and see it closer.

"Be careful," Mom advised as I tried to stand beside her. "Jan, this isn't going to work." She grabbed at my legs.

She was right. The seats curved downward and the back curved out and the drop to the floor of the central hall looked very far down indeed. I finally had to give up, and we moved on to the art nouveau furniture. Every time we came back to the balcony to enter another room, I would stop and try to see my knight from this new angle, but we were getting farther and farther away from him and he was very small, no more than 18 inches high.

Before we left the museum, I bought both the large book on the Orsay and the smaller pocket guide. To my great disappointment, neither one had a photo or a mention of my knight.

It wasn't until years later that I finally got a look at his face. I was on the Internet and happened upon the Orsay's official site. I didn't have a clue who the artist was or what the title was, but search engines are wonderful things, and in less than ten minutes, I was looking at a side view of my knight.

His chain mail is pulled up over his chin and nose and his simple helmet covers his brow. His eyes stare forward as if their gaze alone can keep him on course. He is cold and tired and every ounce of his being is concentrated on holding up his sword and urging his horse forward. A long blanket, probably the only thing warm and non-metal my knight owns, is draped limply over the horse's hind quarters hanging nearly to the ground. He is *Chevalier Errant* by Emmanuel Frémiet and was created in 1878. He is what is known as a bozzetto, a small clay model that is created before a full size piece is sculpted. He was meant to be discarded, a mere draft of the final work.

In fact, if you look up *Chevalier Errant* by Emmanuel Frémiet you will not find my world weary knight at all. Once you make it past all the photos of Frémiet's most famous work, a statue of a mounted Joan d'Arc in full battle cry, you will see that the final statue looks nothing like my knight and his horse. This statue is almost life-size. This horse has on far less armor and is prancing with two legs raised and neck arched, all muscle and sinew straining to gallop forward. On his back, this knight leans back in the saddle, holding the reins to keep the powerful horse in check. He looks up and to his left, a laurel wreath encircling his helmet and his elaborate visor raised. Even his beard is jaunty and pointed, preceding his nose by a good six inches as he rides home triumphant with the head of his vanquished foe hanging from his saddle.

Somewhere between the original concept and the final piece, my knight was tossed aside. He fought hard to ride on, stay straight in his saddle, true to his code, but in the end his quiet dignity was no match for the grandiose taste of Paris in 1878.

Personal visions of the perfect life were quite evident in our two excursions outside the city. Our first trip was to Monet's home and gardens in Giverny. I wasn't looking forward to the bus trip out there. The flight here had aggravated my agoraphobia, and I didn't want another

panic attack, but Monet was Mom's favorite artist and she wanted to see his famous gardens. So I went to the bathroom several times before we left, put my red and white mints in my purse, and smiled as best I could.

According to the guidebook, *A Visit to Giverny*, Monet had spent the early years of his marriage trying to find the perfect place to paint in the open air. It wasn't until after his wife's death in 1879 that his second wife would introduce him to Giverny. Monet would live in his house surrounded by his gardens, studios, and famous lily pond until his death in 1926.

Monet's love of pure color is evident the minute you see the outside of the house. Not that it's easy to see the entire outside of the house. There is no yard, no grass. Only narrow gravel paths between riotous displays of flowers. The blooms climb trellises up the walls of the house. They spread before it, around it, behind it in wild masses. Mom was in her glory.

"Look at it all," she said. "It's overwhelming. The smell. The color. Isn't it wonderful?"

I had found the restrooms and was feeling much better.

"His house is pink and green," I said. "I love it!"

Mom would have loved to turn her entire backyard into flowers. Not the front yard, that was for grass and decorum, but the backyard – that was for flowers. At the first house I can remember, she had Dad put up a chain link fence to define her boundaries and then she went at it. Mom had peonies so huge the blooms would droop to the ground. There were bushes of every kind, irises, daisies, mint, alyssum in white and purple, tulips in the spring and mums in the fall. But for all her love of Monet's gardens, Mom could never have allowed the wonderful jumble of it all. All of her planting areas were neatly outlined in stones. The plants were taught to behave and stay in their places. It was order and predictability. It was Mom.

Versailles wasn't Mom. It was people. The fabled Hall of Mirrors was a sea of humanity. I could barely see anything and at just over five feet tall, I'm sure Mom could see even less. My one clear memory was of making our way out to the back gardens. There was a long series of wide steps leading down to a lovely baroque fountain and the formal gardens beyond. Mom was exhausted. Large groups of people are just too unpredictable for her comfort levels. She sat down on the top step.

"You go ahead," she said, gesturing out toward the vast expanse of lawns and paths that lead to Marie Antoinette's own little idealized hamlet she had built for her pleasure, complete with thatched roof cottages and a pigeon loft. It seemed miles away. I started down the steps and stopped at the bottom by the large fountain. I looked back up at Mom, high above me on the steps with the palace looming behind her. She looked very lost and very alone even though the steps were covered with weary tourists. She waved at me. I waved back. I circled the fountain and went back up to take her back to the hotel.

Whenever we travel, my mother and I play a game. At the end of each day, we ask, "Of all the fabulous things you have seen today, if you could have only one, what would it be?" When we had gone from art gallery to art gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, three years earlier, it was often difficult to choose only one. In London the year before, I chose Queen Victoria's diary after a day in the British Museum. Even the bas relief of the dying lioness from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II with the agony cut deep in her face, as she tried to pull herself forward and the arrows bit into her haunches, couldn't hold my attention like the odd straight up and down, no nonsense script in the small leather diary by the little woman who ruled the Empire. Of all the splendors we saw in Paris, it was my knight.

Small, mysterious, with the added allure of being so near and yet so far, he had captured my heart. We often want the thing we cannot have. The forbidden or unobtainable has called to us since the Garden. Longing adds such a sweet tang to desire. Add to that the sense of solitude and courage that was evident even from the enforced distance at the Orsay, and my knight stirred in me thoughts of my father and his final battles with diabetes when he fought to remain upright as his body died from the inside out. I like to think that some curator at the Orsay had a similar reaction to my knight and put him just out of reach so that every once in a while a visitor would write into his half seen face a history that meant more to him or her than any huge and gilded statue to victory.

On the plane home, the time went much quicker. Our baggage was neatly tucked in the overhead bin and our important documents had gotten us through check-in without a hitch. I had an aisle seat and amused myself by watching the cabin crew give far too much free wine to a fellow stewardess and her mother who were coming back from a trip to Paris. After about four hours, the mother quietly passed out. The stewardess daughter just got louder and louder. Finally the cabin crew realized their mistake and cut off her supply of liquor, but it was too late. The damage had been done. She was waving around her final glass of red wine as she tried to speak French to a man two rows in front of her. It wasn't going well. With one grand gesture she tried to get her point across and managed to throw the entire contents of her glass across the front of my new yellow blouse. She was immediately out of her seat calling for club soda and assuring me that it would take stains out of anything. The cabin crew finally wrestled her into her seat, took away her glass, and turned to see if they could placate me since they were just as much at fault as she was. I smiled. Mom smiled. I took my jacket out of my carry-on and put it over my now red and yellow blouse.

"I'm fine," I said. "Don't worry about it."

"Club soda," said a muffled voice two rows in front of me. "Get her club soda."

"No, thank you," I assured them all as they left to tend to more cantankerous passengers.

Mom sighed and looked over at me. "I'm so sorry. That was your new blouse."

Mom had invited me on the trip, so obviously it was her fault that some drunken woman had spilled her wine all over me.

"It's no big deal. It will either come out or it won't," I said. "I had a great time. Thank you for taking me."

"I can't believe you would come with me on these trips," she said. "Daughters don't want to go on trips with their mothers."

"Why not? We like the same things. We always have fun."

"Then you would think about going again next year?"

"Sure, where did you have in mind?"

"I was thinking Rome."

I hesitated. For some reason, Italy did not appeal to me. It seemed too hot, too Mediterranean for our northern blood. I just couldn't see us in Italy.

"What would you think of a packaged tour?" I asked. "One where you take a bus and see a lot of different places in one country? Some place small like Scotland. You know, Brigadoon and the heather on the hills?"

"We'll have to look in the brochure and see what they have," Mom said, reaching down to make sure her important papers were in her purse. We would be landing in about two hours.

## CHAPTER III

SCOTLAND, JUNE 1999

We decided on a nine-day bus tour of Scotland based mostly on the fact that Scotland is roughly the size of Michigan and our mutual appreciation of Sean Connery. Any country that could produce a man who got better looking as he got older must truly be magical.

Three months before our scheduled departure, Mom and I headed for the local outlet mall to find new luggage. Mom's fancy train trip with Polly had convinced her that on our packaged tour around Scotland we would need larger bags. Our carry-ons just wouldn't hold enough if we had to attend some dressy group dinners. Anything group-based was nerve wracking for both of us. We would need several options to make the events bearable.

Huge displays of all sizes of bags with side compartments, expanding pockets, interior zippered areas and dividers surrounded us.

"We're going to need something with a big open area," Mom decided. "All these extra pockets are just taking up space. We need a big open center so we can see everything at a glance. Lots of room." She was gesturing, her hands getting farther and farther apart as that big open center got bigger and bigger.

"Remember we have to haul these around Scotland," I said, taking a medium-sized bag off a low shelf and rolling it around on its shiny little wheels. "I like these wheels. We could have used these at Heathrow."

"Open it up and see how much room is inside."

I unzipped the bag. Mom peered inside, running her hands over the space. I could see her ticking off items in her mind as she mentally folded them and stowed them in the bag.

"Yes, this would do. Do you like these? Do they have two?"

“Yes, they do. Two matching black ones. They won’t show the dirt that way, “I said, lining them up in front of us.

“OK,” said Mom raising the handle on “hers” and heading toward the register. “Scotland here we come.”

Being more seasoned travelers, we got to the International Terminal in Detroit by two o’clock, only five hours before our scheduled departure. We produced our important documents and for the first time checked our shiny new black bags. We had both made good use of the extra space and even packed a sparkly outfit and pair of impractical shoes just in case they might be needed one evening. The clerk, just like the two before her, asked if we knew we didn’t take off until seven. We smiled, secure in the knowledge that we were in the right place and would be ready when the plane arrived. Yet as we headed for the escalators, Mom kept looking back at the check-in counter.

“You don’t think our bags will get lost between now and when we take off, do you?”

I tried to reassure her but the same thought had crossed my mind. “They should be fine. I watched. She put the right tags on them.”

“But they won’t just stick them in a corner and forget them because we checked in so early?”

I stopped trying to find our gate number on our tickets and looked back over my shoulder. “I don’t think so,” I said, as our luggage disappeared through a small door behind the counter. “No, they’ll be fine. They do this all the time. Besides we have all of our important papers. We have money. If the bags get lost, we’ll be fine until we get them back again.”

Mom opened her purse and put her passport in the interior zippered compartment.

OK,” she said, setting her teeth. “Where’s our gate?”

We flew into Gatwick Airport in London to transfer to the smaller plane to Glasgow. We were groggy and rumped and not particularly happy when we found out our next concourse was a bus ride away. We found our seats and hung on as the bus careened through the half-light of several underground tunnels. As we rounded a curve another bus was coming right at us. Every American on the bus gasped in unison as we braced for collision. I could see the driver's face in the mirror. He was laughing as the other bus passed us harmlessly on the right. It must happen several times every day but from the grin on his face, scaring Americans still hadn't grown old.

When we landed in Scotland, both Mom and I checked our purses again for our baggage claim tickets. If they had lost our bags, we were ready with proof that they were out there somewhere. Our fears were unfounded as we found our matching black suitcases among all the other matching black suitcases on the baggage carousel. We smiled and looked harmless through customs and passport check. Nothing like high cheek bones, curly hair, and a 79 year old mother at your side to allay the fears of a Scottish border guard. Little did he know that our Scandinavian ancestors had burned and pillaged his coastal villages centuries before.

We made our way to the waiting throngs of tour guides and found the one with a bright red jacket. Our names were on her list, another hurdle made. We were quickly and efficiently greeted, our matching black bags tucked in the bowels of the bus, and whisked off to our hotel on the outskirts of Glasgow. We didn't see much of Scotland's largest city. But I didn't care. The nice lady in the red jacket had given me what I really wanted, our tour packet. Mom and I had both been looking forward to this, a real schedule of events. Our days would be laid out before us broken out by breakfast, morning activities, lunch, afternoon activities, dinner, and evening activities. This would make the bus rides bearable. I would know just where we were going (we

even had bathroom stops) and Mom would have a set schedule. Yes, we could do this and it might even be fun.

Our room had a lovely big bed to spread out our treasures. Additional tour come-ons were neatly stacked to the side in favor of the real meat of our packet, the itinerary. It was beautiful. Personalized for Jan Frey Helms and Charlotte Frey Hockman. Unfortunately they had us listed as Janfrey Helms and Charlottefrey Hockman, and that worried Mom, but I promised to mention it to the tour guide. Mom moved a few of the papers carefully out of the way, not wanting to disturb my neat piles, and stretched out on the bed for a nap.

“What time is dinner?” she asked.

I pulled over the itinerary. “Six. We’ll eat and meet our tour director.”

“Set the alarm for ...?”

“4:30?”

“4:30.”

I reached for my travel alarm. I had put in new batteries before we left. I set it for 4:15.

Mom and I and two German sisters were the first ones in the Highland Room for dinner. The red plaid carpeting and green plaid chairs made the room quite festive.

The Germans were already in siege mode, asking our tour director, Joan, a series of questions about the hotels we would be staying in. Will each room have its own bathroom? Is breakfast included every morning? Joan looked businesslike and patient. The Germans were on to exactly which side tours were included in the tour package as the room began to fill with our travelling companions.

Except for the German sisters, we were all Americans. When the prosperous-looking couple from New Orleans asked where we were from, I put up my left hand and pointed to the

approximate locations of Flint and Bay City on my portable map of Michigan's mitten-shaped Lower Peninsula. From across the room a woman yelled out, "Look Howard! They're from Michigan, too!" Our fellow Michiganders hustled over to say they were from one of the many northern suburbs of Detroit, dutifully pointing out that location on their left hands. They had lived in Flint in the 60's and wanted to know if I knew this or that prominent Flint family. The woman was quite disappointed when I said no. I just wanted her to be quiet so I wouldn't miss any of the instructions from our tour director. I had my pen and paper at the ready to take notes. Change money at front desk. No eating on bus. Have bags packed and outside room by 7 a.m. Turn in room key at front desk. Meet at bus at 8 a.m. Don't be late!

The Scots expected us to wake up hungry. The breakfast bar stretched across the room laden with thick pale porridges, haggis, rashers of bacon, brown biscuits and breads, jams and jellies, more unidentified meats, and eggs in every form imaginable. My stomach was anticipating the morning's bus ride so I found a box of Cheerios and ate them dry. Mom had a roll and some fruit. There was a nice quiet corner table and we sat in our red plaid seats knowing that our matching black bags had been outside our door by 6:30.

We stood in line behind the Germans to get on the bus. Everyone had the red day bag we had each been given slung over a shoulder. We looked like a group of overage school children dutifully lined up for a field trip. Joan was ticking names off her list. She seemed quite happy, day one and no stragglers. Finally, the bus door opened and there was the bus driver. I swear a single strong ray of sunlight came down from the heavens to alight on him as he took his place by the door to our home on wheels for the next eight days. He was tall, young, dark-haired, dreamy, and Irish. He filled out the dark suit he was wearing quite nicely. There is nothing sexier on earth than a man in a well-cut suit jacket. It's like those National Geographic films of

cheetahs striding across the veldt, their muscles and bones moving in magnificent purposeful unison under their taut skin. A man's back under the thin restraining gabardine ripples with potential power. Every woman on that bus held her breath as he took her hand to help her onboard. Once in my seat I scabbled through my purse for my notes from the orientation the night before. Yes, there it was. "Bus drivers are not allowed to fraternize or eat with passengers." Oh well, nothing said I couldn't look.

Mom and I took our seats about midway down the portside of the bus. The exit door was across from us. There was a door at the front of the bus and an emergency exit at the rear. It was safe, it was cozy, and I had a clear view of the back of his jacket. I smiled and looked over at mom. She was looking at the jacket, too.

Once we left the industrial red brick of Glasgow behind us, we began our ascent into the Highlands. The cold familiarity of the city gave way to rolling hills. Our first stop was Loch Lomond, a few miles distant but a world away from Glasgow. Steep green hills tumbled down into the deep narrow lake. Rhododendrons that struggle to reach bush size in Michigan grow wild here filling entire cliff faces with pink and red blooms. Huddled together in the cold morning air, Mom and I stood together in awe of the wildness of it all. No motor boats, no jet skis, just a deep cold blue that echoed the sky above. The Germans took pictures. I finally gathered my senses enough to get out my camera and capture a shot of the start of our first packaged tour.

Joan had a tape called *Scottish Tranquility* that she played for the first time that morning. Totally instrumental with just enough bagpipes to make it interesting, the first song was "Loch Lomond." I was shocked to hear Mom start to sing along. She often sang snatches of songs but

never in public. Maybe Sean Connery wasn't the only magical thing in Scotland. Soon the entire bus was singing as we left Loch Lomond below us in the mist.

We would soon find out that there is always mist in Scotland. It rises sluggishly from the long, narrow lochs like ghosts afraid to leave their watery graves or hovers about the tops of the mountains waiting until evening to descend again to the lakes. The bus worked its way up through the fog to emerge on the moon-scape of Rannoch Moor. Huge gray boulders half-sunk in gray clay poked through gray fog. There was no life. There was no air. There was only the silence of the stones and the faint muffled hum of the bus engine. Mom moved closer to me away from the cold outside the window. No one sang on Rannoch Moor.

A perfect dome of visibility hung over the bus. As we moved forward, the fogless area moved with us revealing a bit more of the road before us and a bit less of the road behind. *Here there be dragons.* I took mom's hand. It was cold and incredibly soft, like the first touch of your cheek on a satin pillowcase. We breathed very quietly, afraid to break the spell and make the fog close in completely.

Suddenly, the bus plunged downward. Gray stones gave way to bushes as the fog cleared and we picked up speed. Trees closed in around us and we were still descending. Brakes were applied and we came to a halt at the bottom of a ravine. Weak rays of sun stabbed through a canopy of leaves. Everything around us was green. Everything. Every stone, every tree was completely covered in moss. From their massive trunks to the smallest branch, the trees were green. The water in the small stream was reflecting green as it swirled past moss-covered stones. It was eye-achingly green and absolutely gorgeous, nature's version of the Emerald City.

"Do you believe this?" I whispered.

"No," Mom whispered back. "No, not at all."

After the thrill ride into Oz, we settled back in our seats and relaxed as the bus continued on across a marshy plain to Glenfinnan where Bonnie Prince Charlie raised his father's standard in 1745. We all got stiffly off the bus to look at the tall thin monument to the Prince's landing as the wind blew wet across the marsh. I moved furtively off away from the crowd. I had a rite of my own to perform and it had nothing to do with lost crowns or taking photos.

As Mackinaw Island is to those who love *Somewhere in Time* and the Spanish Steps are to *Roman Holiday* aficionados, Glenfinnan holds a special meaning for fans of the immortals. Those who know there can be only one. Glenfinnan is the birthplace of Connor MacLeod, the hero of *The Highlander*. So I dutifully stood on the shore, feet braced against the wind that whipped around me and recited the sacred words: "I am Connor MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod. I was born in 1518 in the village of Glenfinnan on the shores of Loch Shiel. And I am immortal." One must never neglect one's duties to the truly, wonderfully bad films of our times. A movie about an immortal Scot with a Frenchman in the title role and Sean Connery, the world's most famous Scotsman, playing a Spaniard certainly qualifies as magnificently absurd.

Back on the bus, we pulled out our itinerary and maps. Our next stop was Mallaig and the ferry to the Isle of Skye. This was going to be a problem. The changing scenery and anticipation of seeing some of the locations of my favorite movie had kept me distracted, until now. Boats equal uncertainty. It always seemed odd to me that my father, the perfectionist, loved sail boats. There is so much you can't control or anticipate on a boat. Dad fussed constantly on board but always went back for more. For me it was an exercise in terror. Of course, I never told anyone how I felt. I just worried and kept my head down in case the boom came swinging over my way.

By the time we boarded what turned out to be a huge, solid car ferry with plenty of bathrooms and big diesel engines, I had worked myself up to an anxiety attack. Mom didn't say a

word but took my arm as we walked toward the boat. Of course to everyone else it looked like that nice woman was helping her mother up the gangway.

We were very good at silence in my family. Anything of great importance was always unvoiced. We never talked about Lynne when she ran away from home after her first year at college. My parents must have discussed it late at night, but my brother, Carl, and I never heard anything. Mom would have red eyes in the morning, but we never asked her why. They never explained. It was understood. But of course, it really wasn't. When Mom, Dad, and I went out to Arizona after my grandmother died, we sat in a hotel room after the funeral with my grandfather. There was absolute silence for over an hour. Grandpa was smothered in despair, but everyone was completely silent. No one even moved. I ran all sorts of things to say to break the silence through my mind but nothing was voiced. It was hideous and wicked and unbearable. It was our way. Keep it in. Suck it up. Say nothing and carry on. As our shuttle arrived to take us from the hotel in Arizona to the airport, my father tried to hug my grandfather. Grandpa put his hand up to stop him. He shook his head just slightly, and Dad backed off. They shook hands and we got on the shuttle and left. Grandpa would die a year later. Alone.

The ancestral home of the clan MacDonald lords over the docks on the Isle of Skye. We could see the gray stone walls rising out of the sea before the island came into view. Mom and I walked through the gates into the landscaped ruin. That's done quite a bit in Scotland. Grand old ruins surrounded by manicured lawns and gorgeous local plantings. Mom was getting tired so I went up on the ramparts alone. A strong wind was blowing off the water and Mom looked very small walking in the gardens below clutching her purse with her right hand and holding her red day bag next to her body with her left.

That night outside our hotel in Broadford, we watched the June sky as the sun set late in the west and somehow slid across the horizon to rise again in the east. There was no night, only a long sunset followed by a long sunrise. It wasn't until then that I realized how far north we were. I should have known. I'd studied the maps before we left.

Our bags were outside our door by 6:30 and we were on the bus by 8 a.m. We were second in line behind the Germans which was odd because I was flushed with anticipation. I knew what lay on the other side of the bridge to the mainland – Eilean Donan, the beautiful castle on an island in Loch Duich that was the setting of the Highland sequences in *The Highlander*. Sure enough, we got to stop and take photos from the same car park they had covered with dirt to make the local village in the movie. I have a lovely picture of Mom and me standing together on the edge of the loch laughing loudly over the sound of the wind as one of the German sisters took our photo. I swear I could almost hear the sound of ancient bagpipes coming from the castle.

Back on the bus, Mom looked over at me as I pulled out the itinerary to refresh my memory of where we were going today.

“Your father once accused me of choreographing everything,” she said with a hint of anger in her voice as she looked down at the papers in my lap. “He said I didn't know how to do anything spontaneously.”

I was stunned. My mother never said anything remotely ill about my father. Even when she told me about his two affairs, she never seemed to blame him for them. The most disparaging thing she ever said was, “He did like to do things his own way.”

What had she said? Something about choreographing everything? Slowly, the memory of all those summer trips up to northern Michigan percolated through to my consciousness. We

would get up at 4 in the morning and pack the car with suitcases, groceries, toys for the land, toys for the water, and food and thermoses for the trip. The light from the naked bulbs on the ceiling in the garage would cast a weak light over my dad as he carefully packed it all in only to take some things back out and pack them again so no space was wasted and nothing would shift during the trip. Mom would be worrying her lists. She never had just one. There was the “packing list,” the “take with us in the car” list, and the list of “things to do before we left the house.” Then there was the list of “things to do once we got to the lake,” and the separate list of “groceries to buy at the local market.” It always gave me a stomach ache. I would be exhausted before we even left the garage, my head swimming with Mom’s worried tones in that strange hush before dawn, and Dad’s need for everything to be done perfectly. I would quietly watch the towns go by and the sun come up, mentally ticking off the landmarks I knew so well as we made our way up north: the drawbridge over the Saginaw River, the rest area in Clare, Grayling, the turn at Gaylord, spooky old Elmira where maybe this time we would see someone, anyone, on the streets, and the final winding road to East Jordan.

“We’re both planners,” I said, helplessly. “We can’t help it.”

“How could we just take off?” she said through her teeth. “He was a diabetic. What would he have done if we didn’t have his food or his syringes? ‘Choreographed everything,’ he said!”

It’s a wonder Mom still had her teeth at 79. At the slightest hint of trouble, embarrassment, or even notice, she would clamp her teeth so hard you could almost hear the jaw muscles straining. It must be that all that pressure had turned the enamel on her teeth into some super mineral, like pressure turning coal into diamonds.

We passed very few cars as we went north to Inveroo Gardens, where the climate is so tempered by the Gulf Stream that they grow tropical plants outdoors, and further inland to Corrieshalloch Gorge where the sides of two mountains are too close together to form a loch and too stubborn to combine with each other. A small river lies at the bottom of the gorge, using the centuries to dig it deeper and deeper. The one lane road continued on looping back and forth along the sides of mountains that dipped their toes into innumerable deep blue lochs. Every mile or so there was a pull-off area. If the driver could see another vehicle in the distance and the pull-off was on his side, he had to pull over and wait for them to pass.

We made it into Inverness as the sun was setting, everyone grateful we weren't on those narrow roads at night. Inverness is made of gray stone and apparently always has been. After dinner, we went to see some prehistoric cairns to the north of the city. The round mounds of grass-covered dirt were ringed in the same gray stone as the modern buildings in town. If something works, you keep doing it.

The next day there was a slight change in our itinerary. We were supposed to see a shepherd herd his flock with the help of ten border collies but the weather was a bit too wild for tender tourists. The wind seemed to be blowing from every direction as it wrapped itself around the hills. The sheep didn't seem to mind, and there were sheep everywhere. In the Highlands, Scottish hills aren't rolling green meadows. They are sharp, jagged black rock with wild tussocks of grass sticking out of the crags. The sheep balance on any bit of semi-flat ground they can find with nary a farm house to be seen, even in the distance. How they get up there and how any shepherd or dog would ever get them down, we weren't destined to find out that day.

Instead, we got a lesson in Scottish entrepreneurship. In one of the many valleys, a huge octagonal barn sat in the middle of a parking lot filled with tour buses just like ours. The barn

had been fitted out with bleacher seating around a low stage that held six or seven pens, each containing a sheep or goat. We stumbled into our seats as the lights dimmed and a hearty Scotsman in a kilt and thick woolen sweater the color of buttermilk stepped on stage with a microphone. “Good morning! Guten Morgan! Bonjour!”

“Ah,” I said to Mom, “an animal production of *Cabaret*.”

“That pretty little sheep must play the Liza Minnelli part,” she giggled back.

Mom was giggling a bit now. I couldn’t remember her giggling when I was a child. Life was always very serious in our home. The worry permeated everything and it’s very difficult to worry and giggle at the same time. No, we didn’t laugh, and we didn’t cry. She never fought with me about my choice in clothes. I always did my homework so there were no dramatic ultimatums about schoolwork. I brought home a good report card. Dad signed it. Mom made dinner. Amen.

After a lively lecture in all three languages on the breeds and wool of Scottish sheep and goats – did you know that cashmere is the under layer of hair on a cashmere goat? – we were off to the whiskey distillery and back on schedule with the itinerary.

The Glenlivet Distillery is in the Speyside region of Scotland on the northeast coast where the hills become rolling and green and towns and villages nestle in between. This is *Brigadoon* country. There was heather on the hills. I kept seeing clumps of what looked like red hay off in the distance as we made our way down the long impressive approach to the distillery. Around the last bend, the clumps were closer to the road and I could see horns and large, wet, black noses. These were Highland cows, or “Hee-Lund Coos” as they are called here. Their wavy red hair hangs down obscuring their legs and a mop of long hair on the top of their heads

hangs down over their eyes. The caricatures of them I had seen on several t-shirts were actually quite accurate.

The distillery gleamed. It looked as if every inch of it that wasn't polished stainless steel or copper was hand scrubbed daily. The tour took us on immaculate catwalks past huge copper stills that rose two or three stories from the floor below. Each still was a work of art and tended with the care due to the precious liquid brewing inside.

Once past the stills we entered the tasting room. No more steel and copper here. This was leather and oak and dark high tables with shot glasses containing various shades of amber spirits. The men in the group looked positively reverential and spoke in the hushed tones of church. Each of us was given four glasses: a 12 year old Scotch, then a 15 year, an 18 year, and finally the Archive that is over 20 years old. Mom and I were a bit wary, but we each took a sip. For the first time in my life, I could feel the shape of my esophagus. Mom was on to the 18 year before I even reached for the 15. Her nose was turning red. Not to be outdone, I tried the 15. Either the 12 year had numbed my throat or it was actually quite good. The 18 went down smooth, and the Archive was a bit of heaven in a glass. Maybe it was the wild Scottish weather outside but the room suddenly felt very warm and friendly. We all floated on to the gift shop.

It was like Santa's workshop for the whisky lover. Happy elves in green plaid were scurrying about filling bags with bottles of all different sizes. The walls were lined with rows of gleaming bottles, some displayed swathed in yards of velvet and red plaid. Mom bought a small bottle of the Archive for my brother. The bus was filled with the sound of clinking glass as we sang along to *Scottish Tranquility* and made our way to our next hotel in Braemar.

There's something odd about Scottish houses and hotels. It took me quite a while to figure out what it is. They have no porches. The front door is right on level with what is usually a

gravel driveway. I was used to the slightly skittish look of American houses where the basement seems to raise their skirts out of the dirt, and you step up to go in. Not so here. It's right in the front door, mud and all. The no-step policy probably has a lot to do with the power of The Glenlivet. We were all ready to lie down with smiles on our faces after we checked in.

I couldn't sleep. The hotel was fine. Except for the toilet being on one side of the room in a small alcove with the bathtub and the sink being on the other side of the room, it was quite comfortable. The problem was I didn't know what direction I was facing. The hotel had been built in the 1300s and added onto each century after that. It looked like a rambling castle of gray stone. We had come in the front entrance that faced west onto the main north/south road. But then with all the different hallways and steps up and down and small little three step staircases that led to plaid sitting rooms and more steps and hallways, I had lost my sense of direction.

I looked out the window but the skies were gray and I couldn't tell where the sun was setting. There was nothing else for it. Mom was sleeping soundly; the alarm was set to get us up in time for dinner. Maybe they had a floor plan map I could use at the front desk. I wrote Mom a note and headed downstairs.

The people at the front desk didn't have a map of the hotel, but they were quite happy to show me the way back to my room if I was lost. I thanked them and went outside. The wind had quieted down and I walked around the parking lot marveling at the hodgepodge of wings, turrets, and levels that made up the hotel. I spotted distant landmarks in the north, south, east, and west based on their relationship to the road. I knew that I was facing east as I headed into the main sitting room with its green plaid carpet and red plaid chairs. At each turn on the way back to the room, I reset my inner compass. I walked quietly past the bed where Mom was still sleeping and looked out the window. Yes, there was the bridge into the town. Our window faced west. I

rechecked the alarm clock, kicked off my shoes and took a nap secure in the knowledge that my head was north of my feet.

In the morning, we began to leave the Highlands behind. The rolling hills of the northeast were giving way to flatter land and larger cities. The wind didn't howl around the bus, and sheep were confined in neat green fields. Civilization was creeping up on us.

On the way to Edinburgh, we made a stop at the Royal and Ancient Golf Club at St. Andrews. The club house, square and solid in cream stone, sat with its back to the strong winds blowing in off the North Sea just behind it. The golf course was typically Scottish – wild and primeval and except for the well trimmed greens, in no way similar to the manicured golf courses in Michigan. Here golf is not a game for the faint of heart and “the rough” means just that.

We entered Edinburgh under the shadow of the castle, crouching like a lion on the cliff that juts out above the city. That first evening we were introduced to haggis. I had been avoiding it at all the breakfast buffets and dinner spreads we had attended. It does not look tasty. It looks mushy and gray and glops onto your plate. But tonight we would be present at the Ceremony of the Haggis and watch it cut with a sword. How could I turn down a taste of anything cut by a sword?

It was a fancy dress affair, so we put away our heavy sweaters and dug out the sparkly clothes at the bottom of our suitcases. I thought I cleaned up quite well that evening. As I got on the bus, the driver gave me his hand as he always did and took a breath to say something. He never finished it, but he did smile warmly. We take what is allowed.

The entertainment began with a very energetic dance by a young man in full-dress kilt. The kicks and bounces were energetic enough to show that he was wearing a white

undergarment and this entertainment wasn't going to be as entertaining as it could have been had he observed strict kilt etiquette.

With due pomp, the haggis, made from the heart, liver, and lungs of a sheep cooked with oatmeal and spices in a sheep stomach, was set on a table covered in green and blue plaid. An older man in dress kilt and sword solemnly walked up and recited Robert Burns' "Address to a Haggis." Then, drawing his sword, he made the first incision. Steam spewed forth, a toast was made and returned in kind, and we were all served.

Haggis is traditionally served with neeps and tatties – mashed rutabagas and potatoes – so you end up staring at three unappetizing mounds of mush on your plate. Mom and I looked at each other, bravely raised our forkfuls in salute and took our first bite. It was surprisingly good. If you took a bit of each of the mounds together it tasted like a spicy, meaty casserole. Mom wasn't as impressed, so I finished hers off for her.

On the way back to the hotel we passed Edinburgh castle lit up against the night sky. It was postcard perfect and we were full of haggis and scotch. I was telling Mom how gorgeous it looked when the driver turned and spoke to our tour guide. She nodded and announced that we would pull over for a minute, quite illegally; and with the promise that we would all hurry and not get killed by a passing lorry, we jumped out and snapped photos as quickly as possible. Mom was laughing as we got back on the bus.

We did the obligatory whirlwind city tour in the morning: Edinburgh Castle, the Royal Mile, and Holyrood Palace where the Queen stays when in town. The staff at Holyrood was still cleaning up after Prince Edward's bachelor party the night before.

The rest of the day was "at leisure" meaning the tour guide got a few well-deserved hours off. Mom and I did some shopping, ate in a nice little bistro that looked out on one of the busy

streets, and found the Princes Street Gardens that cling to the side of a steep slope in the center of town. We sat on a bench and watched Scottish children playing with their Scottish parents in the Scottish sunshine. Being a child raised on movies, I pictured the camera pulling back to reveal these parents keeping their toddler from tripping down the steep slope, while a grandfather in Paris holds his grandson's hand as he balances on a concrete curb, and farther south, a mother in Egypt tries to keep her rambunctious young son out of the crocodile-infested Nile.

We put our bags out by 6:30 and I had haggis for breakfast. It wasn't quite as good a recipe as the night before, but it was still quite tasty. I pulled out my itinerary as Mom and I ate. Today we would head back to Glasgow and tomorrow fly back to Michigan.

We were happy, exhausted, and ready to head home.

In Glasgow again, we went to the art museum and saw several of Charles Rennie Macintosh's original furniture pieces and a few of his paintings. I bought a poster from an exhibition he had in Germany and carefully rolled it into a tube for the trip home.

That evening at our farewell dinner, we had a group picture taken. Afterward, Mom and I gave our tip envelope to the tour director and asked where we could buy the *Scottish Tranquility* CD. We had an envelope for the bus driver as well. I went over to give him his.

"Thank you for a lovely trip. I'm sorry I didn't know how to spell your name," I said as I handed him the envelope.

He smiled, and I turned to go.

"Aren't you going to give me a hug?" he asked with a twinkle in his gorgeous Irish eyes.

"Most assuredly," I said and went at it good and hearty.

It had been a lovely trip.

The taxi driver was a talkative local woman who I think was telling me about her children as we made our way to the airport in the morning. I hadn't had trouble with any of the local accents during our trip but a true Glaswegian accent is a horse of a different color – although what color, I have no idea. Mom didn't even try to figure it out. She just settled back in her seat and pretended to be asleep.

I looked at our important documents for the fourth time and made sure I put them back in my purse. Then I opened my purse again to make sure they were where I had just put them. My dog-eared itinerary was nestled in the interior side pocket.

Mom miraculously roused from her “sleep” just as we pulled into the airport. She barely had enough time to check her important documents before we were decanted onto the sidewalk and our matching black luggage removed from the taxi's trunk. Glasgow airport was more manageable than Heathrow, and we were able to find our gate and settle in to wait for the plane.

“I should have gotten that cashmere sweater I liked in the shop in Inverness,” Mom said. “Why do we always do that? We should know by now to pick something up if we really like it. We'll never be back here again.”

“The problem is, you never know what you might see next,” I said. “So we put it off and save our money. By the time we get to the airport we know what we should have bought, but don't have the time to buy it.”

Mom was quiet.

She double checked that her baggage claim ticket was zippered in her purse.

“We didn't play our game yet,” she said. “I would take that sweater.”

“You’re not going to give that up are you? We’ll have to look for a cashmere sweater at home,” I said. We both appreciated a chance to go shopping together. Mom smiled. “Me, I want the driver.”

She laughed. “Would you settle for another trip next year?”

“We’ll have to look through the brochure when we get home.”

## CHAPTER IV

### NORTHERN EUROPE, JUNE 2000

Y2K came and went with much hype and little happening except for a major boom in the Chinese fireworks industry. Our family in Michigan, my brother his children and grandchildren, my son, Andy, and I all went to Mom's house to watch the ball drop in Times Square. As the new millennium spread around world, Mom and I thoroughly enjoyed saying "We've been there" and "Remember when we were there..." when they showed the celebrations in Paris and London. It's always fun to have a chance to show off your worldliness. The only down point was the sideways glance I got from Mom when they showed the fireworks over the Coliseum in Rome.

We had looked over the June 2000 tours when the new brochure came out in the early fall of 1999. Despite the lovely photographs of pastoral Tuscan hills, rows of Cyprus trees, the Coliseum, and the chance to see Michelangelo's *David* up close and personal, I still couldn't picture us in Italy. I knew Mom wanted to complete the big three – London, Paris, and Rome – but all that Mediterranean wine, heat, and abandon just didn't sit well with my Scandinavian upbringing. One of my mother's Swedish aunts had married an Italian. Perhaps there was a familial bond that made it more enticing to Mom. Some call of the blood, even if only through marriage. I tried to picture us in one of those happy Italian landscapes. Every time it devolved into an image of Mom being swept away by some bacchanalian mob filled with raised glasses, off-the-shoulder blouses, and heavy black mustaches. No, we were not Sophia Loren people. We were Ingrid Bergman types. And we both knew what happened to her in Italy.

We finally agreed on a tour of Northern Europe starting in London and ending in Paris with a wide loop to the west through Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland. It was the Switzerland

part that really appealed to us. Mom's father was from Berneck, near Lake Constance. Our tour wouldn't go to that area, very near the Austrian border, but at least we would be in the country of his birth.

Our packing ritual was well established by now. The heavy beige sweaters we had packed for the first trip and never worn were long since gone, replaced with lighter layers. We knew how many pairs of pants to take and how to pick a color scheme so tops and bottoms were interchangeable. Shoes were down to one good pair for walking all day and one black dressy pair that went with several evening outfits. Our matching black cases were now lighter and easier to lug around. We were lean mean travelling machines.

By now we were both realizing that this was part of the problem. We were well-packed travelling machines. Neat little automatons following our itinerary, packing our bags, unpacking our bags, getting off the bus, taking photos, getting on the bus. We had talked often of that one evening in Scotland when a small splinter group had decided to go look at the local cairns near Inverness. We went along and wound up in a local pub listening to a small band. Yes, it had been arranged by our tour guide and we rode on the bus, but for us it was a taste of spontaneity. It was a decision made without benefit of previous research.

The plane trip over was bearable. I had the aisle seat and Mom was drifting in and out of sleep after the second hour of the flight. I knew now not to put the headphones on for the movie; if I did it made me nauseous. I still watched but never got the hang of lip reading. I always made an effort to see the movie when I got home just to see how close my guesses were. I even managed to doze off a bit myself, jerking awake every time my head fell too far forward but then drifting off again into a dreamless exhaustion of muffled conversations, stale air, and an annoying rattling mixed with the constant throb of the engines.

When we landed at Heathrow the ceiling fell in. I yelled “Oh my God!” and grabbed Mom with one hand and put my right arm up just in case the ceiling over us decided to fall down too. Mom dutifully kept her head down until all the screaming stopped.

“Can I sit up now?” Her voice was muffled by our coats that we had been using for blankets on the flight. “My back hurts.”

I looked at our part of the ceiling and decided it looked secure.

“Yes, I think it’s safe now. The ceiling panels came down on the other side of the plane up near the toilet.”

Mom snuck a peek at our ceiling and slowly sat up, raising her hand up too, just in case. After much discussion, the attendants finally decided the best thing to do was to get everyone who wasn’t holding a piece of molded plastic off their head out of the plane and then try to move the light but huge pieces out of the way to get the rest of the passengers off. We gathered our luggage and headed for the exit. No one seemed to be injured. I’m sure the airline’s lawyers were already on their way.

Our red-coated tour representative had us on her list, and we were whisked off to Hammersmith. Not exactly centrally located in London, Hammersmith is to the west of the Hyde Park area we had stayed in before. Mom wasn’t too happy about our location, but the rooms were much larger here in our more modern hotel.

“Let’s not unpack,” Mom said after unzipping her suitcase on the bed. “We have to be ready to catch the ferry to France on Monday morning.”

It was early in the afternoon of Saturday.

I looked up from the itinerary I was studying.

“That’s fine with me. We have a meeting with everyone at 4, then a trip into London for dinner and a play. Tomorrow we can do the half day tour again like we did on the first trip or we could go on a tour of our own to Windsor Castle. I saw it listed on a board behind the reception desk.” This was something new. Something different and dangerous. Something not on our itinerary. I looked over at Mom.

“Let’s do Windsor Castle. Polly and I went there. You’ll like it.”

“Did you get to see Queen Mary’s dollhouse?”

“No, the lines were too long, and Polly wanted to go shopping. But we can try.”

Yes! I love miniatures. Anything small and intricate is an absolute marvel. Queen Mary’s doll house is the ultimate miniature world. It spreads out in miniscule grandeur. Our official guide book said it was housed in a special room at Windsor Castle. The doll’s house was given to Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth II’s grandmother, in 1924 and exhibited at the British Empire Exhibition in London that year. It was designed to show off all the most modern domestic advances. The electric lights work, the water flows hot and cold from tiny taps, and the two elevators run between the wine cellars and garage in the basement to the fourth floor. The library has leather bound books hand written by the likes of Rudyard Kipling, G.K. Chesterton, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and J. M. Barrie. In true turn-of-the-century fashion, each room is filled with every imaginable decoration and detail. There are even petrol cans in the garage along with Rolls Royces and a motorcycle with side car.

Before the evening’s dinner and show, we signed up for the Windsor trip at the front desk, surprised as usual that it went smoothly, and they were willing to take our money. Mom and I didn’t usually go out late in the evening on our trips. It was a bit too dark and unknown

and, since Mom turned 80 that year, she was often tired after our daily travels. But tonight we were going with a group and ready for some fun after our afternoon nap.

We piled into the bus with our tour guide, Colin, a dapper New Zealander who favored ascots. Our driver was a disappointment after Scotland. He was a nice enough Dutchman who was a wizard behind the wheel but wouldn't be distracting me during our journeys. The first stop was dinner at Ye Olde Cheddar Cheese. It wasn't the oldest Ye Olde Cheddar Cheese as it had been rebuilt in 1667 after the Great Fire of 1666. Samuel Johnson and Charles Dickens had supped here. Mom and I made our way up the fantastically worn steps and under a lintel with so many coats of paint the carving in the wood was barely discernable. We ate fish and chips and chocolate tipsy cake on wooden benches much polished by many pairs of pants. The tables were scarred with rings from many a pint.

Next up was the Criterion Theatre on Piccadilly Circus. The sun was only just beginning to go down when we arrived and the Circus was bustling but not overly crowded. The Reduced Shakespeare Company was doing *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (abridged)* and it was with great anticipation that Mom and I entered the lobby of the theatre with our group.

But that was all there was – a lobby and some staircases heading down. And down. And down again. By the time we hit bottom we were three stories underground. There appeared to be a modest turn out which was a very good thing.

“Jan, we’re underground,” Mom said, looking up at the gilt railings on the second balcony high above us.

“Yes, Mom, we are,” I answered holding her hand. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know it was like this. It’ll be OK. There aren’t many people, and it’s big and open with lots of exits. We’ll sit here right by this door, OK?”

“OK,” she answered weakly.

“The play is supposed to be funny. All of Shakespeare’s 37 plays done by three guys in just 97 minutes,” I read from my program. I didn’t include the information that the original venue had been built in 1874 and was lit by gas, making it imperative to pump fresh air in from the outside to keep the audience from being asphyxiated. The cold clamminess of her hand suggested that information would not be appreciated.

“We’ll have to be very British and try an orange crush at the interval,” I smiled.

Mom did not smile. She kept looking up at the balconies.

Thankfully the performance was manic and loud and Mom seemed to calm down as it moved along quickly to the climax of the complete *Hamlet* in 90 seconds. We made an equally quick exit.

Piccadilly Circus was in full Saturday night bustle by the time we came out. It was cars, stretch limousines, black taxis, buses, masses of people, and everything bathed in neon light. From our perch on our bus, we all held our breath as we watched a little Mini Cooper weave through the mass of vehicles with barely a whisper between its side mirrors and disaster.

Sunday was ours. Windsor Castle awaited. As it wasn’t the official half-day tour of London, Mom and I were picked up by a different tour company at around 9 a.m. and deposited in the very crowded bus parking area at Windsor Castle. We had a choice, go on the guided tour and then try to see Queen Mary’s doll house, or go stand in the already long line for the doll house first. I won’t say we made the wrong decision because the castle is fabulous, but I was doomed not to see the doll house. The problem was Doug, our tour guide for this side trip. He was well over six foot four and quite imposing with a wonderful dry sense of humor. He told

witty stories about the castle and the Royals and we had followed him into the castle before we really knew what was happening.

There was something very different about Windsor Castle. With many castles under our belts, Mom and I were becoming quite the discerning visitors. We both felt something alive here that was missing from so many castles we had been in. Windsor is a working castle. It's a home. Of course this home has a grand staircase so large it has life size statues of horses in full armor with knights astride them on the upper landing and two cannons on the lower. Not many home owners in Michigan have room for two horses much less two cannons on their staircases, but still there is a sense that you could turn the corner and see Her Majesty surrounded by yapping corgis at any turn. House staff could be glimpsed going about their duties and all the ropes were obviously temporary and could be removed to actually use the space for the glittering state ceremonies. We followed Doug from room to glittering room marveling at everything from huge wall decorations made of concentric rings of antique guns and rifles to an intricate ship's model under glass.

We left the castle complex through the Windsor Royal Train Station. It is quaint. There is no other way to describe it. It was like entering a Disney version of Victorian London without all the poverty and filth of the real thing. The shops were fascinating little boutiques filled with Toby mugs and Scotch woolens and Winnie the Pooh collectibles based on the original E.H. Shepard drawings. There was a sweet shop on one corner with gorgeous old cases with dark wood and curved glass.

"We have to get something," Mom said, peering into cases that were almost as tall as she was. "Look, they have marzipan and macaroons!" We bought a selection of about six different

treats and held them carefully on the bus all the way back to the hotel. There we spread them out on the bed and split everything in half so we could both try them all.

“Oh, you have to try this one,” Mom said with her mouth full of some fluffy chocolate concoction.

“This marzipan is fabulous,” I mumbled back as the sweet aftertaste of almonds filled my mouth.

We polished off the lot of them, agreeing that while the marzipan was some of the freshest we had ever had, the macaroons drizzled with dark chocolate had just the right sweet stickiness, and we should have bought more.

Monday meant boats. We would take the channel ferry to Calais. This was going to be a major test as the weather was rainy and the waters were quite rough. We would also be out of sight of land. The bus trip to the ferry dock was hell. I was way past anxiety even before we left the bustle of London behind. I grabbed the bar behind the seat in front of me and held on tight, concentrating on the feel of my muscles cramping in my fingers. Neither Mom nor I spoke the whole way to the ferry dock, both afraid that if we did, I might explode.

I was doing better with each trip. I really was. There had been years when riding in a car was impossible. But I was working now, supporting my family, and had to grant myself permission to move about without fear or at least with the fear contained. The trips were helping, too. I wanted to go, and if I wanted to travel that meant cars, planes, buses, and unfortunately boats. Perhaps it was the infrequency of travelling on water that still made me panic at the thought of going on a boat. Perhaps it was the memory of boating with my father that still made it frightening. To me, boats were everything wrong with my relationship with this man I loved and feared. When we were on his boats, he expected me to be perfect, and I expected me to fail.

He always looked so disappointed when I did. That's what hurt the most. He didn't scold. He just took whatever I was supposed to do and redid it the right way. I had let him down again.

Well, I wasn't letting Mom down. We made it across the channel and into France and I didn't whimper once.

From our landing point we piled back onto the bus and headed east into Belgium to our hotel in Brugge. We were only staying one night so we didn't unpack. We all met downstairs for lunch then headed out on a walking tour of the town.

Colin was setting a fine pace, his jaunty ascot a bright spot of red at the head of our group. We passed women sitting in doorways making lace, their tatting bobbins flying under practiced fingers. The city was lovely with a wide, slow river running through it. Houses with steeply tiled roofs seemed to rise right out of the water. Space is at a premium in many of these old cities and river banks are prime real estate. We paused in an archway as Colin talked about the local church. Mom leaned against the stone arch. She was having trouble keeping up. Cobblestones are not kind to normal feet no matter how thick the soles of your shoes. Mom always put extra padding under her injured foot, but she was still walking on mangled bone since the ball of her foot had been amputated by the lawnmower. The group began to move off after Colin. Mom put her head down, grabbed the strap of her purse firmly in her hand and set off.

"Mom," I called after her. She stopped and looked back. "Do you really want to go on the rest of the tour? We don't have to, you know. I know the way back, and we could stop at some of the shops."

She was watching the group get farther ahead.

"Would you mind if we didn't see the rest of the town?" she asked. She was standing with her weight on her good foot.

“Not at all. Colin is going too fast. Look the group. Nobody can keep up with him. He’s no Doug from Windsor, Mom.” She still wasn’t convinced. “We could try a Belgian waffle.”

She perked up a bit and unclenched her teeth. “Yes, we need to try Belgian waffles in Belgium.”

We found out that Belgian Belgian waffles are not like American Belgian waffles. Yes, they have the little square indents and are made on waffle irons, but the real thing is crisp and dipped in an orange glaze and eaten like a cookie. They were wonderful and tasted sinful. The waffle might as well have been an apple. We were free, on our own and not obeying the itinerary at all. We sat on benches when we wanted to and watched ducks in the river. The ladies tatting in the doorways would smile as we strolled past. There was even a Belgian chocolate shop where we bought another small assortment of treats and ate them at a table outside our hotel. The rich dark chocolate reminded Mom of the sweets that her uncles in Switzerland would send at Easter and Christmas.

Colin strode up to the hotel an hour later with our bedraggled tour group gasping behind him. We smiled sweetly and went in for a nap before dinner.

The next morning we made a quick stop in Brussels to see the Mannikin Pis, the famous little statue of the young boy peeing into a pool. It was small and unimpressive after years of seeing copies all over the States. The McDonald’s, however, was magnificent. It was in what had been one of the oldest banks in Brussels. The marble floors, high ceilings and baroque ornamentation along with the attendants in the restroom handing out towels gave the Big Macs a flavor of aged respectability.

Several miles and many Audis and Mercedes later as we cruised down the autobahn, we began to glimpse the Rhine in the distance. The next part of the trip was a cruise down that major

waterway. The boat was white and blue and looked quite friendly. When I stepped on board, I was feeling oddly happy. The river was wide and smooth and I could always see both sides. One side sunny and covered with grape vines, the other forested with a castle at every bend. Mom and I sat on the upper deck enjoying the warmth. Colin took our photo and we both had sun-reddened faces and big smiles.

The skipper regaled us with the story of a two wealthy brothers torn apart by a dark-skinned beauty brought back to Rhineland after the crusades. The fair German maiden, loved by the quiet brother and spurned by the other in favor of his foreign conquest, killed herself. The grieving younger brother built a wall between his castle and his brother's that still stands today. The castles are only ruins, but the wall is still tall and strong.

Mom had known that type of enduring hatred. My father's mother had disliked her from first meeting. Mom wasn't good enough for her son the doctor. When Grandma began to show signs of Alzheimer's disease, Mom was the one who packed up my father to go visit her in Sun City, Arizona. He didn't want to go. Mom didn't either. But go they did. Grandma didn't recognize Dad. She thought he was the principal of the high school Dad had attended in Cleveland. She didn't even recognize my grandfather, her partner of over 60 years, but she knew Mom right away. It seems that hatred still trumps love in longevity.

I don't remember much of Heidelberg where we spent that evening, although I have the photos to prove we were there and went through the castle and across a beautiful arched bridge in the center of the old town. The day had started a long time and many miles ago, both wet and dry, in Brugge. Our hotel was at a crossroads surrounded by fields of corn. We slept soundly that night.

Our bags were out on time the next morning, and we headed south into the Schwarzwald, the Black Forest. The countryside became less rolling and more hilly. Dense old growth pine trees wrapped the hills, engulfing them in intense dark green and filled the air with their smell. The Rhine and its tributaries shallowed into brooks spilling over beds of stones. We were drowsing on the bus dreaming of beds of pine boughs when we were rudely brought back to reality as we pulled up at a cuckoo clock shop cum tourist haven that boasted a playground for the kids, and Kirshwasser for the adults. Mom took hold of my hand.

“Now you stay with me, Jannie,” she crooned, obviously enjoying herself. “You know what cuckoo clocks do to you.”

It was one of our family stories. The kind that is trotted out way too often for the protagonist’s comfort. In this one, I am about three years old and in a huge department store with my parents and sister. We had stopped in the clock department to watch the cuckoo clocks strike the hour and then headed on to our real objective, the men’s department. Buying clothes for Dad was agony. It took hours, which seemed more like days in kid-time. Lynne and I would play quietly under the racks of jackets and pants looking for loose pins or the big prize – the little plastic clips that held socks together on those tiny sock hangers and looked like alligator heads. But this time, I didn’t stay put. I wandered off. Mom was watching us out of one eye and trying to placate the flustered clerks (they were always flustered by the time Dad finally found some clothes that pleased him) at the same time. When she realized that I was gone she panicked. Neither my sister nor I had ever done anything like that before. We were good little girls. We stayed where we were told. The story would continue with Mom pawing through racks of coats, running down aisles looking for me until my father grabbed her arm and said “I think I know

where she is.” They found me back at the cuckoo clocks waiting for the birds to reappear. A group of clerks were all watching with me, waiting for my parents to show up.

I dutifully rolled my eyes at Mom and followed along as we headed upstairs to the overly Bavarian restaurant. We had Black Forest cake in the Black Forest.

The Rhine falls into Switzerland and we dutifully took photos of the torrent before we headed on into Lucerne. We were home. On our way, we passed the turn off to St. Gallen, the canton where my grandfather had grown up. We took a photo but knew we would have to settle for being in the same country. Neither of us wanted to drive in a foreign country, and our tour was headed southwest not east.

Lucerne has grown up on either side of the Reuss River just where it spills into the Vierwaldstättersee (complete with umlaut) and is towered over by the mountain Pilatus. We had just enough time to drop off our luggage at the hotel before we were rushed off to catch the little red gondolas that lifted us up the first stage of the mountain.

“This is nice,” Mom said, noticing that each car only held four people.

“Not too high,” I concurred.

We went up with a grandmother with her middle-school aged granddaughter who had taken to us when I fixed the young girl’s skirt zipper back in Brugge.

Lovely doe-eyed Swiss cows grazed below us, each with a huge cow bell around its neck that would sway in sync with its belly. They looked like velvet from our altitude, soft and the color of Swiss coffee with lots of cream. Chalets with steeply pitched roofs, their bottom stories bright white and the top a deep dark brown grew out of the mountain side at increasingly impossible angles as we rose higher up the mountain. Just past the tree line the little red cars

ended and we all transferred into a much larger single car for the final ascent. The top of the mountain was still a long way off.

Mom and I moved to the front of the car so we could get a good view out the large window. Snow began to appear and the grass receded, afraid to climb the steep rocks that now replaced the sloping pastures. I was staring at the gray craggy surface below us when suddenly it disappeared. The ground just dropped away, and we were hanging in space between two peaks. I dropped to my knees on the floor of the car as the whole group erupted in laughter including my mother. I was too busy trying not to pass out to care. Finally, I just gave up trying to stand and sat down on the bare metal floor. I didn't get back up until we stopped at the top.

Michigan is not known for its mountains. Where I come from it is particularly flat. Except for riding in a plane, I had never been this high up in my life. We were walking above the clouds. The world was gray rock, white snow and sky. The wind was bracing and I had to pull Mom inside the restaurant and souvenir store perched on the peak to keep her from being blown away. We were all presented with caps to commemorate our trip up the mountain.

The trip down was just as bizarre to flatlanders like us. We rode down on a train that was designed to match the slope of the mountain. The seats were level but the cars were pitched at an impossible angle. When we sat down there was a definite feeling that the world was completely off kilter.

"Look over there," Mom said, pointing at low clumps of white fuzz that seemed to litter the ground as we neared the base of the mountain. "That's edelweiss."

"What! That's not small and white, clean and bright," I answered. "It's low and creamy and fuzzy."

“That’s edelweiss. I have a handkerchief with those embroidered on it that belonged to your grandfather.”

It was very disappointing. Christopher Plummer had led me astray. But a bigger disappointment awaited us when we finally gathered our suitcases and got the keys to our rooms. Our hotel was lovely, right on the river and overlooking the old covered bridge that is a landmark in Lucerne. Our room was on the opposite side. We weren’t going to get to see the lights on the river at night from our window. We both pouted for awhile then took a quick nap before our Swiss Folk evening.

It must be the altitude and the cold, or maybe it’s something in the milk from those velvet cows, but the Swiss, my grandfather’s people, have very strange ideas of entertainment. Yes, there was yodeling. That was expected. It was actually quite interesting watching the strange undulations of the yodelers’ throats. But the group that spun coins around the inside of empty bowls left me cold, and there were just way too many accordions for my taste.

The next day was at leisure and Mom took me to see the *Lion of Lucerne*. She had been talking about this sculpture ever since she saw it with Polly on their train trip. The lion is carved into the sheer vertical face of a glacial outcropping and commemorates the Swiss guard who protected Louis XVI during the French Revolution. Of the almost 1000 members of the Swiss guard over 700 were massacred and many more died later of wounds or the guillotine.

The lion is dying. A broken lance protrudes from his ribcage, piercing at least his lungs if not his heart. His face is a study in resigned agony. The end is very near and will be welcomed. Brow furrowed, eyes braced against the pain, he lies with his head resting on a shield with the French Fleur-d-lis. Another shield leans against the wall of the niche that will become his tomb. It bears the Swiss cross. His mouth is slightly open and soon the final breath will escape his

wounded lungs. Everyone is quiet who sees him, as if waiting to hear that final breath escape and see the muscles of his face relax in death.

We spent the rest of the afternoon browsing the small shops, buying a Swiss army knife for my brother and edelweiss pins for us. The flower looked much more like I imagined it when done in pewter. We wandered into a lovely little jewelry store where I decided to buy a necklace. Unfortunately, the one I wanted was in a case with several other pieces. I asked the very handsome owner if he spoke English. He didn't but followed me over to the case. I pointed to the necklace on the right and then counted over, "Eins, zwei, drei, vier," then looked at him to see if he understood. His face lit up and he repeated, "Vier! Ja!" He was as relieved as I was. Between his small English and my smaller German, I think he even understood when I explained that my grandfather was Swiss. Mom found a pair of earrings she liked. We sorted out the price and got the pieces wrapped separately, "Not zusammen...ein und ein," and were about to leave when he motioned for us to wait. He went over to a case and took out a lovely little crystal, raw and unpolished, craggy like the mountain we had climbed yesterday. He pointed at our packages and said, "Not Swiss, Finland." Then he pointed at the crystal and said, "Swiss," handing it to me. I smiled warmly and thanked him.

It had been a lovely day. After dinner, and a walk along the river that we couldn't see from our room, we went upstairs to get out our clothes for the morning and make sure everything was neatly packed away. Tomorrow would be the long bus trip to Paris.

"Do you have the necklace and earrings?" Mom asked, knowing very well that I did but still having to ask.

“Right here,” I said showing the parcels to her and letting her watch me put them back into my suitcase. “And here’s my crystal. That was so nice of him to give us something from Switzerland. He was good looking, too. He reminded me a bit of Carl, don’t you think?”

“Carl has my father’s lovely straight nose. It must be a Swiss thing.”

“Yes, we both seem to fit in here. Have you noticed? Lots of people with high cheekbones. What was that?”

A deep low hum was vibrating through our room. We went over to the window and looked down at a crowd gathering in a small plaza below our room. Nine men with huge alpine horns of gradually decreasing size were standing in a semicircle. The one on the longest horn had made the deep bellowing sound that still seemed to vibrate in the air. They began to serenade the crowd with a series of deep ringing tunes. In front of them, four men twirled huge Swiss flags and threw them up in the air to catch and twirl them again.

“How can they do that?” I asked Mom who was sitting with me on the window seat. “Not just blow those huge horns, but the men with the flags must have wrists of steel to be able to throw those huge flags around.”

“Why is it that the smallest men always blow the biggest horns? It’s like the barber shop quartets where the tall skinny one has the deepest voice,” she marveled. They played on until the sun set, and we got into bed for our last night in Switzerland.

By the time we passed the Eiffel Tower the next evening, it was glowing golden against a deep blue sky with a full moon perched just over the railing on the first level. “An 2000” was lit up where the countdown to the millennium had been that last time we were here. Our hotel was at the far end of the Champs Elysees in the much more modern and business-like area of Paris, out where bankers roam and tourists realize they have chosen the wrong hotel. Out here the

square plain frame of the Grande Arche at La Defense faces the distant and elaborate Arc de Triomphe.

We only had tomorrow in town and the morning was booked with a half day tour of the city, most of it spent at the Louvre. I spent that evening looking over my map of Paris.

“Mom,” I said tentatively. “If we don’t want to go on the tour tomorrow, we could ask Colin if he would let us off at the Place de la Concorde, then walk across the bridge to the Rodin Museum.” I scooted over to her bed to show her on the map. “See, it’s right here and the Orsay is right there. We could see the Rodins then walk over to the Orsay and have lunch in that lovely restaurant on the top level.”

“How would we get back?” she asked. She had never let me forget that we had walked back to our hotel after our seven hours in the Louvre because I was afraid to try and hail a taxi.

“I promise, I will ask Colin how to get a taxi to get back here. There’s no way we could ever walk this far.”

“OK. You talk to Colin in the morning and see if he agrees.”

He was reluctant but reassured when I asked him how to get a taxi at the Orsay and watched as I took notes on my map of Paris. As our bus neared the Egyptian obelisk that dominates the square, Colin motioned for us to stand by the doors. The driver got the signal to stop briefly in the traffic as Mom and I hopped off. We were on our own in the early morning in Paris.

Parisians do not get up early. The strange little green street cleaning machines were still making their rounds and it was already 9 a.m. The streets were deserted, but traffic was beginning to pick up as we crossed the bridge and made our way over to the lovely mansion that was now the Musée Rodin. It was just opening when we arrived along with a handful of other

tourists. The house itself was lovely and airy with several sculptures and memorabilia of Rodin's life. The main attraction was the garden.

Here amid beautiful topiary and roses was *The Thinker* with that strange little cap? hair? on his head. He was close enough to see that the hand resting on his chin is actually pushing against his upper lip making it push back into a forced sneer. *The Gates of Hell* are here, too. A smaller *Thinker* above the doors that writhe with the damned. Over under the trees, Mom was standing among the *Burghers of Calais*, displayed here as it was meant to be seen – at eye level. They are us. The same height, you can walk next to them and study their faces.

“Look at the young one, “Mom whispered. “Look at his face. He can't believe they'll really go through with it.”

She was right. The six men were walking toward their doom. The sculpture is of an event during the 1347 siege of Calais by the British during the Hundred Years War. These six leading citizens offered their lives if the British would lift the siege and let the rest of the population live. As was Rodin's style, the planes are strong, the lines broad, and the finish rough. Yet the expression on each man's face is clear – resignation, despair, grief, or disbelief. As they walk forward, the young man turns and gestures back toward the way they have come. His mouth slightly open you can almost hear him asking the older man behind him, “They won't really kill us will they? They wouldn't do that. They'll let us go home.” Thanks to the intervention of the British Queen, they did.

And so did we. After another trip through the Orsay and another try at seeing more of my knight – this time I noticed that there is a skinny cat sitting on the saddle behind him peering around to see the road ahead – I hailed a taxi and got a driver who spoke English. She drove us back to the hotel where we had a quiet supper before tending to our luggage one last time.

“I’m not sure what I would want this time,” I said after the plane had taken off and we were arranging our drinks and peanuts on our tray tables. “I asked for my knight once before so I can’t say that again. Maybe one of the cannons at Windsor Castle. This was one whirlwind trip. It still seems like a blur. Maybe that cuckoo clock we saw in the Black Forest.”

“Which one?” Mom asked, trying to remember back that far.

“There was one small one like the one you and Dad got me for Christmas when I was little. It was small and quite plain with just some oak leaves and acorns carved on it. It was over by the staircase that went up to the restaurant where we had the Black Forest cake.”

“I can’t remember it,” Mom said. She was sounding sleepy already. “But I want another one of those macaroons we got at the Windsor train station.”

## CHAPTER V

ITALY, JULY 2001

I looked down from our hotel room in Rome onto a scene of complete chaos. The intersection near our hotel had traffic lights. I could see them on the corners, but I had no idea which were red and which were green. Cars were coming from every direction. Some were turning right from the middle lane. One was turning left in front of another from a lane of its own imagining. Mixed in were motorcycles and the constant blaring of horns. A single woman carrying a shopping bag was walking across the street but not in the marked crosswalk.

Mom had won. After our multi-country tour last year, we both knew that we preferred one country at a time. The only other country we would have liked to see was Sweden, but our tour company insisted that Sweden alone wasn't enough and always threw in Norway and Denmark. Some tours even added Finland and Russia. Mom mentioned Italy again, and this time, I gave in. We would be going in July. June was already sold out. Mom wasn't the only one who wanted to see the wonders of Rome.

One of the wheels on Mom's black suitcase had been broken during our last flight home. We had saved our receipts with our guarantees when we bought our luggage and managed to get it repaired in time for the flight from Detroit to Rome. What we didn't know was that some countries won't let you in if you only have six months left before your passport expires. The clerk behind the counter got a worried look on her face when I showed my important documents to her in Detroit and called over a supervisor. Luckily, Italy was more lenient and would allow me to visit for nine days. We were off to a great start.

The plane trip was over ten hours, our longest flight yet. Long enough for two movies and lots of boredom. Mom fell asleep at the two hour mark as usual, but even she was getting

very restless by hour eight with two yet to go. We took turns walking up and down the aisle to try to relieve that horrible aching inactivity in our leg muscles. It seemed to center in the upper thigh and felt like tight looseness, a desire to be used and relaxed at the same time. It was yes and no, do and don't with a massive headache thrown in. So we walked a bit when we could and pressed hard on the muscles when we couldn't. Just when I was sure amputation, even with the little plastic knife left over from the dinner service, was the best alternative, the attendants began to bustle about again getting ready for the decent into Rome. Mom and I busied ourselves with checking our important documents and worrying about whether or not the Italians would let me in with my nine year and six month old passport. They did.

That evening we had dinner with our tour group and went over the itinerary with our guide, Sophia. She was middle-aged, with dark wavy hair and sensible shoes. She stressed several times the need to board the bus at 8 a.m. each morning. She had an elaborate seating plan. We would each take a seat and every time we got off the bus at a site, for a rest break, a meal, we would move to the seat in front of our former seat if we were on the port side of the bus and the seat behind if we were on the starboard side. That way, she explained, no one would be able to complain that they always got stuck in the back of the bus. This was a first for us. In Scotland, there had been no seating plan. On the European tour, we had just moved up a seat each morning. This plan seemed unnecessarily complex, but Mom and I always kept our day bags with us so it would be no trouble for us to move several times.

That evening there was an optional excursion. I don't even remember where they went, but many of us were so tired from the long trip that only a handful of people boarded the bus. The rest of us talked for a bit in the lobby and then went off to bed. The itinerary for tomorrow was daunting.

We had our bags outside our door an hour early and were the first ones to board the bus. Mom and I chose a seat about half way down on the port side and said good morning to a few of the other people we had talked with the night before. One of the last people on the bus was a tall, thin woman with a long face and a small husband. She got on the bus and immediately began to screech. Everyone was sitting in the wrong seat. Didn't we remember the instructions! We were sitting there last night and should be sitting here now! Get out of our seats! She was screaming at a nice older couple who had gone to bed last night even before we did. They looked bewildered and embarrassed at first, then, as the harpy got louder, the man took his wife's arm as she started to give up her seat and told her no. They were here first and here they would stay. Shrew woman was in tears by now and completely hysterical. A very nice teacher from Ohio tried to calm her down and explained that not everyone went on the trip last night so we should start fresh this morning and follow the seating chart from here on. Finally, Sophia arrived with her clip board in hand and told the woman to please sit down so we could get moving. It was eight o'clock and we had a schedule to keep. The sudden lurch forward of the bus was the only thing that got her to find an empty seat.

"That was unpleasant," Mom said, looking back at the woman and getting glared at in return.

"We're going to have to remember where we sit each time. Maybe there are numbers on the seats," I said looking all around. "Nope, don't see any."

"I have a scarf in my suitcase," Mom said still keeping her eye on the crazy lady. "I'll put it in my day bag tonight. We can leave it on our seat each time we get out. Then we'll know where we should sit next."

We could have used it that first day. Our game of musical bus seats would get quite complex.

Our first stop was Vatican City and St. Peter's Basilica. Mom's main memory of the over-abundant opulence was the dead popes in the walls. We would be looking at some small detail trying to focus our eyes on a single object among the incredible vastness of the ornamentation, then turn a corner and there was a dead pope lying in a glassed-in case in the wall. Mom was quite freaked out by the display of all this waxy deadness.

I was looking forward to a close look at the *Pieta*. I had to settle for the photo in the brochure. The sculpture was set back in a series of alcoves. The bullet proof glass kept everyone a good 30 or 40 feet away. All you were allowed was a distant glimpse of the front. There was no way to see it but straight on and then at such a great distance that I had to use the telephoto lens on my camera to try and see some of the detail. It didn't work. Displaying a sculpture where you can barely see one side should be a criminal offense.

The Sistine Chapel wasn't much better. It was a sea of people even at that early hour and they kept everyone moving so the next group could be herded through. I was afraid of losing Mom in the throng. We soon abandoned trying to look up, and just kept moving and holding on to each other as we were pushed and shoved under one of the world's great masterpieces.

I was quite glad to leave St. Peter's behind. We moved up one seat in the bus and headed out into the bright and massive marbleness of the historic center of Rome. Columns and temples and columned temples, and steps, and more columns. Then finally the Coliseum and we were off the bus again. We hustled through the crowds, looked at the maze of walls that once were covered by the floor, and tried not to lose sight of Sophia who seemed more interested in getting us to the vendors than back on the bus. We were six seats behind the driver now and would get

back on at five. Everyone on the tour was beginning to grumble except for harpy woman who was getting closer to the seat she felt was rightfully hers. Sophia didn't seem to notice.

We were heading out into the countryside now, to Tivoli and the Villa d'Este built by Lucretia Borgia's son. We pulled up in front and everyone looked around to remember seats.

"Four back next time," Mom said.

The villa was lovely. Built around a central courtyard, the rooms were light-filled with fabulous views of the hills around Rome. We walked around back to a large marble patio that led to the villa's crowning glory, the 500 fountains. Sloping down below us in a series of terraces, the gardens were filled with all manner of fountains. From small single sprays in moss-covered niches to rows of arching streams that jumped elaborately trimmed hedges and small bubblers around the edges of large pools with central fountains, water was flowing everywhere. By now we were about a quarter of the way down. Mom had her hands on her hips but wasn't fooling me. She wasn't impatient to go on; she was surreptitiously rubbing her back.

"Do you want to go on? We can stop here and watch the fountains. Remember, if we go on down, we'll have to walk back up." As soon as I said it I knew I had made a mistake. Now it was a challenge. She set her teeth, gripped the strap of her purse and led the way past the waterfall fountain, the animal fountains all spouting water from their mouths and no two the same, down to the fountain of the four dragons, and finally to Neptune's fountain at the very bottom. By now we were all exhausted. Even the young honeymoon couple was ready to sit and just listen to the music from all the water above and around us. Much later we made our way back up.

Back on the bus we were in our fourth seat of the day.

Dinner was at a farm in the countryside. Long rows of cypress trees marched down the lane that led to fields of vegetables surrounding large tents filled with tables. Everything was locally grown, simple and delicious. Violins played familiar Italian songs in the background. Each table had strange little percussion instruments with three mallets that were mounted inside a wooden frame. If you moved the frame back and forth, the mallets could tap against each other in time with the music. At least they were supposed to. Mom picked ours up and with great intensity began to tap the mallets together.

“You have to find the beat,” she said, never looking up from the task before her.

Occasionally, she actually did find it.

On the bus, full, tired, and in the third seat behind the driver, we headed back toward the lights of Rome and our hotel. It had been a very long day.

Morning began with a mutiny.

It was 8 a.m. and everyone was dutifully lined up to have our names checked off Sophia’s list as we boarded the bus for Ostia Antica, the original port of Rome and archeological site. All it took was one couple to be a bit hazy on where they were supposed to sit for everyone to be reduced to a bunch of sheep milling in the aisle.

“Weren’t you in front of us?”

“I remember we sat across the aisle from each other on the way to the dinner last night. We were talking about grandchildren.”

“SHE was over there, I think”

“Yes, I remember SHE was on the opposite side up by the driver when we pulled in last night.”

Everyone instinctively moved toward the back of the bus.

Finally, the grandmother from New York taking her two teenage grandsons to see the Old Country sat down on the edge of a seat to wait for things to be sorted out. Then another couple sat down where I thought we should be. Mom shrugged and sat on the edge of our favorite seat just opposite the side entrance to the bus.

Once on one of our very early morning trips to the lakes in Northern Michigan, we were out in the middle of nowhere stopped at a red light. No one was on the road. No cars, no people, it was 4 a.m. and everyone else in the world was in bed. Dad stopped at the light. We waited. And waited. And waited. The light did not change. We still waited. Dad looked around. Still no one. We waited. Mom in the front seat holding a sleeping Carl and Lynne and I in the back all watched to see what Dad would do. Dad looked around again. Very slowly we crept out into the empty intersection then continued on. Lynne and I looked back and watched until we could no longer see the still red light behind us. It was thrilling. Dad had not only broken a rule, he'd broken the law.

The harpy and her husband, who were perpetually the last people on the bus, had just made it past the checkpoint and were now standing by the driver. An anticipatory silence fell over us all. Mom started to get up, but I was pushed up against her by everyone else crowded in the aisle toward the middle and back. She sat back down and grabbed her purse strap firmly, set her teeth, and stared at the shrew as if daring her to make a fuss. Sophia entered behind the troublesome couple, double checking her list and looked up ready to make her cheery "good morning everyone" speech. She was stopped by the face-off in front of her.

Harpy and her husband stared at us and we all stared back at them. With three measured steps they walked toward us and turned and took their seats. The Grandmother and her grandsons

weren't moving. Mom just scooted over and made room for me. Gradually we all filled in the remaining seats. One of the men looked at the still silent Sophia and then at the shrew.

He was well-dressed and looked as if he was used to commanding attention in a boardroom.

"Please remember who is sitting in front of you and who is behind you. We will be sitting in these seats for the entire day," he announced.

Harpy woman stirred in her seat but said nothing.

"Tomorrow those on this side will move up one seat and those on that side will move back one seat. Nobody will get stuck in the back," he continued with a pointed look at the offending couple, "and we can all leave our belongings in one seat for a whole day. Now let's get going."

He sat down to a hearty round of applause. Sophia took up her microphone, and we were off to the coast.

Ostia Antica was a city with its top layers scraped off. Beautiful mosaic floors lay open to the sky. Columns no longer held up roofs. It looked like a hedge maze made of sun-baked bricks instead of bushes. Near the center was what had once been the public theater and this ancient stage was being set up for a play that very night. Cords and metal scaffolding for the lights were being set up in front of ancient columns topped with huge square blocks carved with grotesque faces portraying exaggerated expressions of fear, happiness, and anger. The ancient stones would again play host to an audience of theater lovers.

After several hours of hot mosaic floors covered in half horse/half fish creatures pulling chariots and even a few sun-baked frescos of beautiful red fish that still emphasized the city's

ties to the sea, we were all glad to get back in the air-conditioned shade of the bus and head back into Rome.

“I’m a puddle,” said Mom, getting some of her Kleenex out of her purse and wiping her face and neck.

“How’s your foot?” I asked, “That was a lot of cobblestones.”

“It’s fine. Can I have some of your water?”

“Sure. That was so great this morning. That man telling off the harpy lady.”

“She didn’t say anything when we got back on the bus. Did you notice? Not a word.”

“I wish I could take charge like that,” I said, looking over at the man.

“Sure you can,” Mom said, ever the cheerleader. “You would if you really had to.”

It sounded good, but we both knew it wasn’t true. We were very conflicted sheep. We had strong opinions, but we were too polite to voice them. Mom and I would have continued to grumble about the seating arraignments every evening. But every day we would have dutifully changed seats. Conflict did not appeal to us, probably because we have no regulators. We either accept or when pushed too far we become so engorged with rage that all attempts at rational thought are impossible. I remember Mom finally snapping once when Lynne kept talking back to her. She was so mad she was practically speaking in tongues and that had scared us far more than anything she had tried to say.

At school, if I got worked up over some imagined slight, a great white light would fill my head, engulfing any hope of a rational argument in a blinding nothingness. I talked to my brother about it once and was relieved to find that same thing happened to him. When angry, all clarity of thought disappeared, and it wasn’t replaced by anything. That was why we were all note takers and rule followers. When sanity deserted us, we could grasp a bit of reality by consulting

our list or someone else's rules. It wasn't a good way to live. It felt a bit too uncomfortably like Germans during World War II, blindly following the leader instead of taking a stand against the insanity around them.

I was rather ridiculously proud of us for not just sitting in our assigned seats this morning. Oh, I knew where we were supposed to sit, and I'm sure Mom did too. We really didn't want to spend another day worrying about stupid bus seats. We hadn't taken charge, but we hadn't acquiesced either. It was a start.

"I have some crackers from last night in my bag. Want some?" I asked softly.

We weren't supposed to eat on the bus.

Mom looked over at Sophia who was pointing out some landmark as we reentered the heart of the city.

"Yes."

Very quietly we ate our forbidden fruit.

The Pantheon was lovely. Incredibly quiet despite the number of people inside. The interior space was cool and dark. We made a circuit of the interior looking at the lovely little marble doves that were kissing in mid-flight over the tomb of Raphael and his mistress. At least they had the decency to be entombed instead of lying in glass coffins. We wondered what had been on the walls before the Christians had taken it over with all their statues of the Madonna and religious frescoes. From the center of the vast open space, we watched the light from the oculus, a 30 foot hole in the center of the dome, move slowly up the interior of the dome as the sun began to set.

As it was getting late, we headed for the Spanish Steps and then on to Trevi fountain. Despite the crowds of people, Mom and I both managed to throw a coin in and make a wish.

When I'm on a trip, I'm too superstitious not to wish for a safe return home. I'm sure that the one time I don't our flight will get cancelled or we'll get hijacked. So I made my usual wish. Mom wouldn't tell me what she wished for until several months later.

Sophia gathered us all up and we headed back to our hotel. Thankfully this was our last day in Rome and we would head out into the countryside tomorrow. She was giving us our instructions for the morning, making sure we all knew the importance of getting to the bus by 8 a.m. as we had quite a bit of road to cover before we made it to our hotel in Florence. She made a special point of looking at our perpetual stragglers, the harpy and her husband.

"Did everyone get a chance to throw a coin in Trevi Fountain?" she asked. We all nodded assent. "You know throwing one coin assures that you will come back to Rome some day."

Mom and I looked at each other. Not if we had something to say about it.

Morning found us motoring up the west coast of Italy along the Tyrrhenian Sea. The breeze was cooler and our spirits picked up considerably with every mile we put between us and Rome.

London had been crowded. The Louvre had been a madhouse by the time we left it. But Rome was one big jostle. Everything and everyone bumped into each other. Cars, people, buildings built on top of buildings, Christianity plastered on top of Roman gods, it was too much and too close for us. Out here away from the city there were farms and fields on the right and the vast expanse of blue sea to the left. We felt refreshed.

You can see the Tower of Pisa from quite a distance away. It looms above the city and yes, it most definitely leans. It leans far more than either of us expected, and I must admit we both kept an eye on it as we walked around the square that held the cathedral, the baptistery, and the tower. Sophia had dropped us all off at the bus parking area with instructions to be back in

two hours. It was a bit of a hike from the parking lot to the square. Mom was already slowing down so we limited ourselves to the cathedral's classic Italian Gothic architecture. It was certainly far smaller than St. Peter's in Rome and had the added attraction of the black and white bands of marble that Italians liked to add to break up the great height of the vault. We walked a bit around the square that was filled with shopping stalls for tourists, then decided to take our time and stroll back to the bus.

We sat under one of the few trees in the parking lot and had some water and tried a few of the sweets we had picked up from one of the vendors. It wasn't quite Belgian chocolate or English macaroons. We decided to stick to the wonderful gelato we had discovered at a vendor near our hotel. There were plenty of flavors yet to be sampled.

Two by two the rest of the group began to return. Sophia checked us off on her list as we got on the bus. The grandmother from New York was still outside and Sophia was talking to her. The grandsons were nowhere in sight. We couldn't quite hear what was going on, but the grandmother was getting quite agitated. Sophia finally hustled her onto the bus. We could all see the older woman was crying.

"We will be heading on to Florence now..." Sophia began.

"Wait." It was the school teacher from Ohio behind us. "What's going on? Where are the boys?"

"The boys have missed the bus," stated Sophia. "We have a schedule to keep."

This was one of my worst nightmares come true. The words just spilled out of me.

"But how will the boys get to the hotel?" I looked over at the Grandmother. "They don't know the way there do they?"

She was in absolute misery. “No, they don’t. They’ve never been here before, and I haven’t been here since I was a little girl.” She wiped her eyes and pointed at Sophia. “She says I can stay here and look for them or go with you and hope the boys find the way by themselves.”

The entire busload of outraged Americans turned toward Sophia.

“I have a schedule to keep,” she said, straightening her back. “We are not allowed to deviate from the schedule.”

Mom turned to me. “She’s kidding isn’t she? We can’t leave those boys here.”

“No, we can’t,” I answered. I turned around to the teacher behind us. “We have to wait for them.”

“Look,” she said to Sophia. “If you’re worried about the schedule, we’ll all sign a paper saying we all agreed to stay here and find the boys.”

I got out my pad and flipped through my lists to find a clean sheet. Together, the teacher and I drafted a release for Sophia. Everyone signed it. Three of the men hailed a taxi and headed back to the square to find our wayward sons. The bride and groom had bought a kite and they unpacked it. We all got out to watch as they tried to get it to fly over all the buses. Just as they were about to give up, the wind was just too fickle, the taxi returned with both young men in tow. They had actually returned to the bus in one hour and couldn’t find anyone. By the time they made it back to the square to look for everyone, we were all on the way to the bus. Sophia didn’t give us any commentary on the way to Florence.

My fondest memory of Florence is *David’s* bottom. If there’s one thing Michelangelo could do well, it’s the male form. Let’s face it; the women he painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were just men with grapefruit stuck on their chests. But *David*, all 17 feet of him, is marble at its best. And after the *Pieta* disaster where it might as well have been a painting, the

Florentians did it right. They placed *David* in a circular domed room all to himself. You can, and we did, walk around him several times. His relaxed contrapposto stance is in direct opposition to the look of apprehension and tension in his face. It is as if he has been caught at the moment when he first sees the giant off in the distance. In a second he will center his weight and the battle will begin. But now, his skin is soft over his muscles. His sling rests loosely over his shoulder. He is exquisite.

We went through the Duomo, saw Brunelleschi's dome and Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise*. We toured the Uffizi Museum and enjoyed watching the local artists who sell their wares illegally outside the museum. They spread their paintings out in a row on the pavement, usually with a narrow tarp underneath and each painting slightly overlapping the next. Then when the local police come strolling slowly up the street the dance begins. With practiced hands, the artists finish their latest transaction while rolling up their paintings and quickly moving off. This continues in a wave of activity in front of the advancing policemen. Then as the law rounds the corner, the artists fall in behind them again, unrolling their wares and trying to regain the tourists' interest.

Mom was getting tired more quickly this trip. She liked to blame it on the cobblestones and certainly there are many of those in Italy. Her back was hurting and often in the evening when she finally got to take off her shoes, there was some blood on the padding she used in her left shoe. The whole trip had a feeling of finality about it. Even if the world hadn't changed forever just six weeks after we got back, we both knew we were approaching a turning point. Of course, we would never talk about it. No one would dare tell Mom she needed to slow down. Only time itself would convince her.

The next day found us in San Gimignano, one of the fortified hilltop towns in Tuscany not far from Siena. It was all cobblestones at a steep slant so Mom and I sat near the entrance and looked out over the wide valleys filled with vineyards below us.

“It looks a bit like the Rhine, doesn’t it,” I said. “Lots of grapes on one side and the castle behind us.”

“You can go and look around if you want,” Mom said. “I’ll wait here.”

“No, I’ve seen enough shops. It’s nice and cool here.”

“You were right about the heat here.”

“It might have been better in early June, but I have a feeling it stays pretty hot here all the time.”

“Thank you for coming with me on all these trips. Most daughters wouldn’t want to travel with their mother.”

“You always say that and we always have a good time. I wouldn’t have missed *David’s* bottom for the world.”

She laughed. “It was pretty magnificent wasn’t it? Did you see the newlyweds? She kept trying to go around again and he kept trying to get her to leave.”

“The women certainly seemed to appreciate that piece of art much more than the men.”

“Did you pack the postcards?” She was talking about the postcards of *David* that we bought at the gift shop.

“Oh yes. We’ll have to send one to Lynne when we get home. She’ll appreciate his... attributes.”

We rejoined the group and made a quick stop in Siena before heading on to the vineyards at Verrazzano Castle. We bought a bottle of grappa for Carl and had our first taste of bread dipped in fresh olive oil.

We headed back to Florence for one last night before moving on to Venice.

We were lucky. Venice was dry. We had heard stories of tourists balancing on makeshift floating walkways in St. Mark's Square or overcome by the smell of stagnant water and other disgusting effluvia. But our Venice was none of these. It was freedom.

After checking into yet another hotel, we all walked down the narrow alley-like streets to the Piazza San Marco. The walk over was like a first-person shooter videogame. Narrow alleyways twisted and turned with signs that pointed either toward the Piazza San Marco or the Rialto Bridge near our hotel. Tiny little shops filled with grotesquely leering Venetian masks made of leather and feathers made the narrow walkways even more menacing. Over one last bridge and a through a short alley and the world opened up into the vast sun-splashed Piazza.

Filled with pigeons and people, the open area was a welcome relief until we saw the Basilica and Duomo. Sophia was headed right for them.

"Jannie, I can't take another cathedral," Mom said, firmly.

"Neither can I. Let me tell Sophia we aren't going along, so she won't worry, and we can decide what we want to do."

I started off after her but turned back.

"Do you want to go on the boat to Murano this afternoon?" There was a scheduled trip to several local islands after lunch. One of them was where they made the blown glass clowns that Mom had been collecting for years. We had passed several in the shop windows as we made our way to the square. "I can ask where we need to be so we won't miss the boat."

“Can we take a day off?” Mom asked. “Just do what we want. There were plenty of places to get food back there.” She gestured toward the labyrinth.

I gave her a hug and ran off to tell Sophia we were going to amuse ourselves today. She was quite sure we would regret it, but I was already heading back over to Mom who was leaning against the base of a lamppost.

“We’re all set. Let’s sit down, have a drink, and just look around the square.”

As people swirled around us and pigeons startled and settled on every possible perch, Mom and I relaxed for the first time since we landed in Rome. The day was ours. No bus seats, no time tables and no cathedrals. We roamed around the square, choosing what restaurant we would eat at later on based on what we saw on people’s plates. As we made it to the area farthest away from the Basilica, the pace softened and even the number of pigeons per square yard decreased significantly. We had been walking toward a large building with long banners in the windows alternating between images of fire and waterfalls.

The Museo Civico Correr is often empty according to the wonderful docent we talked to in the museum. She must have been lonely when she found us looking at a fascinating installation that featured logs and other natural objects fitted with monitors that showed pictures either of fire or water. Mom and I were surprised at how the mere picture of either fire or water could so radically change your perception of the object that contained it. One log was a peaceful reminder of streams in Northern Michigan and the next one was a hollowed out remnant of a fire ravaged forest.

The docent noticed Mom’s slight limp and suggested that we go through these huge wooden doors nearby and into the globe room. The light was dim to protect the huge globes, their browning covers now darkened with age. Each showed the succession of knowledge of our

world as explorers brought back tales of foreign lands discovered and recorded them here on these fantastic examples of the cartographer's art.

We stayed until hunger called us back out into the Piazza. The crowds and heat were even worse now. The cool dark alleyways beckoned and we plunged out of the light and into the warren of shops and little food vendors. We each got a freshly made "estate" panini. We had discovered the delights of this simple lunch back in Florence. A sandwich of fresh mozzarella was topped with basil leaves and tomatoes then drizzled with olive oil and pressed between two hot plates to crisp the bread. It oozes out the sides as you eat it and tastes like fresh gardens even when eaten in an alley in Venice. We topped it off with a gelato from one of the many vendors.

Space is a real problem in Venice. In the area we were in, we didn't see any grass or green space for our whole visit. Every inch is used for shops, houses, alleys, or churches. The sun only shines in for a few minutes a day when directly overhead. It was always startling to suddenly emerge on a bridge over one of the many waterways and feel the sun again.

Venice is known for its Carnival and most of the shops sold the long nosed leather masks favored by the men and the wildly extravagant feathered masterpieces designed for the women. I would have loved to have one, but our matching black bags only held so much and trying to make a decision on color and style would have been agony. I finally settled on a little clay marionette of a Venetian soldier for my memento of our lovely day in Venice. Mom hadn't found anything yet when we passed a jewelry shop with a familiar name in the window.

Mom's maiden name was Frey, originally Frei. It means free in German.

"Jan, look! It's Michaela Frey. I saw her jewelry in Vienna with Polly. Isn't it exquisite? She has these different series all based on a different era – Egyptian, Greek, Art Nuevo, Deco. Look at that necklace."

“Mom, was this your cashmere sweater from your trip with Polly?”

She looked puzzled.

“Cashmere sweater?”

“Yeah, the one thing you regret not buying when you were there?”

“Oh, I suppose so. But this is much more expensive.”

“We haven’t bought much except food this trip,” I reminded her. “And we won’t be able to take a glass clown back home with us on the plane even if you found one you liked.”

“True.”

“Let’s go in and see how much it is.”

The shop was like all the others. Just a narrow area behind the large front window that served as the display case for all their wares. The older man who had been watching opened the door for us and welcomed us to his shop in very good English. His technique was just right, not too pushy, very polite, and friendly. He quoted us a price. It was high but the necklace was gold with intricate enamels inlays and definitely worth what he was asking. Mom still seemed hesitant. I knew she wanted it but something was wrong. Finally she motioned me over to the far end of the shop.

“I want it, but my credit card is in my money belt,” she whispered. “I can’t get to it without unzipping my pants!”

We both wore a money pouch on our travels. It had an elastic band that held the flat zippered pouch against your stomach. Large enough to hold our passports, credit cards, plane tickets and extra cash, even if our purses were snatched, or luggage rifled at the hotel, we still had our important papers with us at all times.

“Hmmm, give me a minute. I’ll be right back.”

I went over to speak to the nice man behind the counter.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No, not really. My mother would like to buy the necklace, but her credit card is in her money belt and she would have to unzip...”

“Oh, no problem,” he laughed. “This has happened many times. I will turn my back and your mother can do what she must over there in the corner.”

She did, and despite being the color of the tomato we had on our paninis at lunch, Mom managed to buy in Venice the one thing she had wanted from her trip to Vienna.

We went back to the hotel and examined our purchases leaving just enough time to take a brief nap and get dressed for dinner. When we met our group in the dining room, all reddened and windblown from their island excursion, we both felt nicely rested and a bit smug.

The next day was our last in Italy. We transferred from the water taxi back to our bus and headed across Northern Italy to Verona and then on to Milan and the flight home.

Verona is dominated by a huge pink marble coliseum and its place in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. While the rest of the group trotted off to see Juliet’s balcony, Mom and I walked over to a local fruit market and bought a bag of almonds roasted in cinnamon. We watched people and nibbled in the shadow of the coliseum. Another bus ride and we were in Milan our final destination.

There is a cathedral in Milan. Covered in spires that seem to drip ornamentation down the sides of this huge white confection, Mom and I were impressed but quite content to take a few pictures from the outside. Nearby was a Galleria with an exquisite arched glass roof connecting the two rows of shops and restaurants. It was elegant. The glass and iron roof gave it a very

Parisian air. The shops inside were way out of our price range but as with most European shops we treated them more like art galleries, a chance to see some excellent craft and design.

At the far end of the Galleria, sharing space with Versace and the like was a McDonalds. It was a little bit of home.

“Should we?” Mom asked, looking back at the elegant bistro chairs and waiters with their white aprons and linen cloths over their arms at the other restaurants.

“Oh yes, we should,” I agreed and we quickly went inside before anyone from our group could see us. We shouldn’t have bothered. Most of the others were already there. Sitting with the school teacher from Ohio and the newlyweds, we all ate McDonalds hamburgers and fries across the street from La Scala.

We packed our bags that night. I put my little clay Venetian marionette in my day bag and Mom looked at her necklace one last time and slipped it into hers.

The plane trip back wasn’t nearly as bad as the trip out. We had a stopover in Amsterdam that broke up the monotony a bit. The cool modernity of Schiphol Airport was a welcome relief after so many days of excessive ornamentation. The Milan cathedral with its high Gothic excesses was now replaced with huge open spaces, clean lines, and floating seating areas with upholstered benches in muted shades of gray and blue.

Mom was exhausted and I wasn’t far behind her. She fell asleep almost immediately after we boarded our flight back to Detroit. She looked pale but peaceful with her head tilted back and her mouth slightly open. She hadn’t mentioned a trip next year. I knew that if we went somewhere it would be in the States. This was our last long flight together.

Things were shifting again just as they had when we first started our travels together. The baggage we carried was still with us, but we had shuffled it around. Allowed certain items to

remain in the main center compartment, relegated others to side pockets. Some priority items like itineraries were still neatly folded in safe zippered compartments. We weren't giving up our important documents. We'd just come to realize that the rules aren't set in stone, they're printed on paper.

It's allowing yourself to try new things that is so hard. Rituals can be comforting, as dulling as opium and as addictive. Sacrificing a chicken may work for a while to ensure the harvest, but then a drought comes and habits must be changed. Maybe it's a bull this time, or even a man. The repetition is safe. It gives a sense of control among the randomness of nature. Religions work like this, too. You stand up. You sit down. You repeat certain words, and the outcome is guaranteed. Until it doesn't work. Then splinter groups try new rituals, read new meanings into the old words, change the pictures on the walls, and build their own safe havens. Until something changes. Then those chains have to be broken and new ones forged. We learn from the past and build on it. Nothing stays the same no matter how much we wish it would. The important thing to remember is that it shouldn't.

The plane touched down on the runway jolting us both awake. We began gathering up our luggage as the plane taxied to the gate. We checked our important documents and tidied up our little space.

“Welcome to Detroit. The local weather is 82 degrees with clear skies. Please remain seated with your seat belts fastened until we are stopped at the gate and the pilot turns off the seatbelt sign. Please use caution when opening the overhead bins as baggage may have shifted during the flight.”

## EPILOGUE

BAY CITY, MICHIGAN, FEBRUARY 25, 2011

I'm back again, Mom. They called me at 11:30. Danny and I had just fallen asleep at your house. They say it's time or will be very soon. You are breathing so quickly, over 100 breaths a minute. Panting really. I don't understand why you don't hyperventilate. I did that once. Do you remember, it was when Robin was born. You and Dad got a speeding ticket driving over to Lansing to be there in time for her birth. I was so scared. I was breathing wrong. Suddenly, my arms and legs both drew up in this horrible tightness. They put a paper bag over my mouth until they finally relaxed. That happened in just a few minutes. Why doesn't it happen now?

Danny's here too. He's sitting over in the rocking chair. He's been a great help during all this, keeping our house running while I'm over here and helping me and Carl with all the paperwork. That coin of yours in Trevi Fountain was right on the mark. You got your wish. I found a good man. He's a keeper.

I don't know if Carl is coming. I called him right after they called me. He wasn't sure he could do it. Don't worry, I told him he didn't have to come.

You might not even want me here. You probably waited until after we all left last night, hoping to go quietly without bothering anyone. Wasn't that odd that everyone showed up last night? Even Lexi came. She was so frightened but told her mom that she would feel horrible if something happened and she didn't see Great Grandma one last time.

The quick breaths keep coming. How can you keep that up?

Carl's here, Mom. He gives you a kiss and touches your cheek. He gives me a hug, too, and we step out of the room.

"She's been breathing like that since before I got here. The nurse said it was normal."

“I was going to stay home, but I couldn’t do it.”

We go back in. We both go to the bed and touch your hand.

Your quick breaths fill the room. They are the room. They are us.

Around 3 a.m. there is a slight hitch in your breathing and we all wake up from our thoughts. I go and sit by your side. The quick breaths start again. Carl and Danny go out to get some coffee.

“It’s time to relax, Mom,” I say out loud. “You can relax now.”

Two nurses come in to check on you. They lift up the covers and look at your skin.

“See the mottling? It won’t be long now. Are you alright? Is there anything you need?”

“I’m OK. My husband and brother are here. They went to get coffee.”

“If any of you need anything we’ll be just down the hall.”

“Thank you.”

It’s 5 a.m. and still no slowing of your breathing. The nurses are beginning to say that it’s unusual for it to last this long. The last time they raised the sheets the one nurse gasped and said you were “a little refrigerator.” You think you’re due a certain number of breaths in this life and you aren’t going until you get every last one of them. Our little Viking.

Sometime around 6 your breathing starts to slow. No other change, just a gradual slowing to a more normal cadence. Carl is now standing to your left and I’m sitting to your right. Danny is at the foot of the bed. There have been a few more pauses, and we are all on edge.

At 7 a.m., a respectable time to bother people, you take two breaths and then one that’s slightly deeper. No more follow.

Ten seconds. Fifteen. A minute.

None of us has moved.

“I’ll go get the nurse,” I tell Carl. Danny runs his hand down my arm as I pass.

The nurse takes out her stethoscope. Your heart is still beating. She waits a minute and checks again. Still beating. Another minute.

“She’s gone. We’ll give you some time. When you’re ready come and get us.”

I call Lynne and let her know. Then Robin and Andy. Carl calls his sons. We go get the nurse and then take seats in the kitchen area and have a cup of coffee. I cry.

Once the tubes are finally all gone, we go back into the room to pack up your things. The change of clothes you didn’t need, the photos, and the five stuffed animals go in the big canvas bag we used to use for extra life jackets and ropes on the boat. Carl and Danny carry the silk flowers, and we head for the car.

I look back at you. They have raised the bed up and flattened it out. Your face is silhouetted against the window where the sun is just beginning to rise on a cold February morning. Your head is tilted back and your mouth is slightly open. I have the luggage, but you have already gone.

