

7-2020

Crossroads

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CROSSROADS

By

Rebecca A. Keyes

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

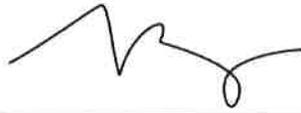
Office of Graduate Education and Research

July 2020

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

Crossroads

This thesis by Rebecca Keyes is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Education and Research.



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Date



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ABSTRACT

CROSSROADS

By

Rebecca A. Keyes

My thesis is a collection of nonfiction narrative essays that explore my relationship with fear: where it comes from, how it affects me, and how to move forward in life despite its sometimes crippling effects. My thesis also takes into consideration the ramifications of inherited trauma and how such shared family history--passed on through the blood or by the stories we share--provides a framework for analyzing my own fear. Like my title essay "Crossroads" implies, I find myself at a pivotal moment in my life--a fork in the road, if you will--and my thesis is an attempt to make a decision about my future by examining my current frustrations and also my past--in particular the moments and experiences in which I found the courage to move beyond fear. My thesis also takes into account how travel and travel literature, with their ability to take one outside one's normal life or experience, can offer perspective and, in the case of actual travel, the opportunity to take risks and grow beyond the limits we all too often place on ourselves.

DEDICATION

To my parents who made my travels possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you first and foremost to my parents for not only funding my early travels but also believing in me even when I didn't. You made all my dreams possible.

Thank you to my thesis advisor Dr. Rachel May for encouraging me to dig deeper and expand what I thought my thesis could be. You patiently put up with my worries and fears and my requests for the one thing high school English teachers never have enough of--time. Your travel writing course planted the seeds of this thesis. To Dr. Caroline Krzakowski, you reminded me that despite my busy schedule I had the strength to finish my Master's. Thanks for the nudge. Thanks also to Dr. Prather for sitting with me and helping me come up with a plan to finish my degree, and to Dr. Amy Hamilton for your invaluable suggestions and feedback on my drafts.

To Sarah Weiger, many thanks from *this* girl to *that* girl. You took time away from being a busy mom to read my jumbled, rambling thoughts and offer me clarity. You truly are a "professional reader." I'm so glad our moms introduced us that one day back in junior high when we sat on the porch and played with all my cats. My only regret is that we didn't become friends sooner. Thank you to my good friend Catherine. Meeting you in Sweden was fate. I hope one day we can continue our travels.

To Auntie Pammy and Tanya--thank you for allowing me to dredge up the past and answering all my hard questions about our traumatic family history. I love you both dearly.

This thesis follows the format described by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Travel is something I have always loved ever since my parents--both teachers--took my brother and I on road trips across the U.S. during long summer holidays, and I have grown to love travel even more the further I venture. Each trip has taught me something new about myself and the world. Each trip has made me not only more confident but also more mindful of other cultures and ways of living. Given my love of traveling and my love of writing, I thought it would be interesting to take a course in the travel writing genre of which I knew very little. Thus, the seeds for this thesis were planted in the EN 505 Travel Writing class taught by Dr. Rachel May in the spring 2018. We were given many creative assignments, but I found myself writing predominantly about my trip to New Zealand. Our last assignment in particular--to write about a transformative experience--was the beginning of this thesis, which was originally titled *There and Back Again*. The title was a nod to J.R.R. Tolkein's *The Hobbit* in which Bilbo Baggins, an adventure-adverse Hobbit, gets swept off on an epic journey and returns home changed. Whether it was the age at which I went, the people I met, the beauty of the country itself, or my experience student teaching at a high school near Auckland, the three-month visit was transformative and empowering. Traces of that first essay remain although my thesis became so much more.

When I began this thesis I wanted to write a collection of essays about New Zealand--about my three-week road trip across the North and South Island with my friend Catherine and my experience student teaching in a different country. I envisioned a coming-of-age memoir / narrative describing how the experience awakened within me a new-found sense of confidence and agency. Originally, I saw my narrative following in the footsteps of other journey narratives

in which travel is a means of self-discovery and growth. In that sense, my writing wasn't necessarily about New Zealand, the country, (or the outward journey) so much as the physical journey was the catalyst for self-discovery/self-transformation (or the inner journey). When discussing travel writing's affinity with life writing--how the two often overlap and work in tandem--Simon Cooke points out in Chapter Two of the *Routledge Companion to Travel Writing* the paradox that because travel writing often focuses on only a portion of a person's life, it can "sometimes seem like an excursion out of the life, or an episode in a life that is distinct yet resonant in terms of the life-story as a whole..." (19). Cooke writes that "by definition [travel writing] documents experience away from the trappings of one's 'normal' life" (19), yet this paradox actually helped me clarify my larger theme and explore one of the essential questions underpinning my thesis: how do I break out of the rut of my normal life to overcome my fear. My essay based on my experiences in New Zealand titled "Go North" was meant to demonstrate a time in my life when I was able to work past my fears and learn from them instead of being held captive by them.

To give me a better understanding of the travel narrative genre, I read works such as Robyn Davidson's memoir *Tracks: A Woman's Solo Trek Across 1,700 Miles of Australian Outback*, Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* and Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. These works are obviously much larger in scope than my very short essay, but I could relate to each author feeling lost in some way and her decision to make a journey to try to gain perspective and reclaim a sense of self. In her memoir, *Wild*, about hiking the Pacific Crest trail alone, Cheryl Strayed describes her encounter with and triumph over fear: "I simply did not let myself become afraid. Fear begets fear. Power begets power. I willed myself to beget power. And it wasn't long before I actually wasn't afraid" (51).

Another work that inspired me was Faith Adiele's *Meeting Faith: An Inward Odyssey* in which Adiele, who journeys to Thailand to train as a Buddhist nun after failing a year at Harvard, uses travel as a means to explore her own inner landscape. In her introduction, Adiele admits, "When I fled my country, I didn't take a map. I wasn't looking for anything" (26). She further explains how "For the first time in my life, I was lost. Even if I could swim, where was the shore?" (26). I like the paradox that is at the center of Adiele's memoir: that to find herself, to travel inward, she has to travel outward or halfway around the world. I didn't go to New Zealand to find myself, but to prove to myself that I was strong enough to face my fears.

Christina Thompson's *Come on Shore and We Will Kill and Eat You All: A New Zealand Story* and Joe Bennett's *A Land of Two Halves* were not only helpful as accounts about the people, places, and culture of New Zealand, but also as accounts written by outsiders (white people of European descent)--neither one born or raised in New Zealand. Thompson, an academic from the United States, fell in love with and married a Maori man; Bennet, an Englishman, planned to teach for a year and then move to Australia, but fell in love with the country and stayed. Their perspectives about why they loved New Zealand helped me make sense of my own.

And while my thesis is still partly about New Zealand--specifically with the "Go North" section, its focus shifted. As I was writing, it became clear that, thematically at least, my thesis was about fear--the nature of my fear, where it came from, how it shaped the course of my life, and how I learned to (sometimes) rise above it. The title essay "Crossroads" establishes the controlling question or dilemma I faced as a single, 39-year-old woman living in a small town: should I stay or should I go? For the past decade, I have been asking myself whether or not I can have the kind of life I envisioned for myself here in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Am I

happy with my career? Can I find a husband? Is there any hope of starting my own family? Is my life in its current state all that my life will ever be? Is this where I was meant to spend the rest of my life? On a deeper, more figurative level, I wonder whether or not I can ever find the courage within myself to not only make up my mind but then take the necessary steps to follow through and take control of my life.

However, as I was examining the origins of my fear--quite late in the writing process--my thesis veered in a new direction, and I started to think about the ways in which familial trauma travels. Does it move through stories, infecting generations of tellers and listeners? Or does it move in a more subterranean fashion, somehow in our spirits or our genes? Which do we fear the most? Can we outrun either? What purpose might understanding the views of our ancestors serve? How might it explain, or distort, our understanding of ourselves?

The second essay in my collection, "Inheritance," explores these questions as I trace the fear and anxiety and family trauma in my maternal line as a way to better understand my own fear and anxiety. Because I discovered this vein of thought so late in my writing process, I was not able to do much reading on it. If I ever expand my thesis, I would plan to read more widely about inherited trauma and the relatively new field of epigenetics. In her book, *Survivor Cafe: The Legacy of Trauma and the Labyrinth of Memory*, Elizabeth Rosner uses scientific research and also personal experience as a child of Holocaust survivors to explore the effects not only of intergenerational trauma but also mass trauma. She is interested in how "researchers are attempting to unravel the mysterious mechanisms by which the trauma of parents and grandparents is transmitted to subsequent generations" (3). However, in Chapter Four, "They Walked Like Ghosts," Rosner describes both the necessity and the inadequacy of bearing witness to atrocities such as the Holocaust: "Words are inadequate and essential, words are what we

have. The stories have to be told and somehow saved, and that's the part I don't know how to say in a way big enough. It's everything." This is the same trepidation I felt as I bore witness to my family members describing the drowning accident of my Uncle Tony; I wanted to accurately represent their experience while also realizing the impossibility of doing so.

Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, while very different from my story, shares similar themes and questions. His book is a lyrical memoir written in the form of a letter from a young Vietnamese man to his mother, who immigrated to Michigan sometime after the war. Vuong's book, like Jeannette Walls' *Half Broke Horses: A True Life Novel*, offers an interesting interplay between fact and fiction. Walls' book tells the story of her grandmother, Lily Casey Smith, from the first person perspective--as if her grandmother was the one telling her own story instead of Walls recreating it from family interviews and memory. I found both Vuong's and Wall's books helpful when trying to piece together and retell the story of my own family's tragic past in "Inheritance."

EN 505: Travel Writing was the first time I'd been introduced to and asked to ponder the ramifications of postcolonialism in travel writing. Faith Adiele's book, *Meeting Faith: An Inward Odyssey*, which we read as part of the course, helped me here as well. She has a good writer's eye for detail, but also the discerning and perceptive skill of the anthropologist. Adiele describes the notes in her journal as stemming from "the traveler's desire to capture exotic details of place, but is it the traveler, immersed, or the anthropologist, detached, who so carefully records these dimensions, smells, and sounds?" (147). Her question speaks to the nature of the travel writer's role and perhaps her duty. Adiele, along with other female travel writers and writers of color, such as Jan Morris and Saidiya V. Hartman, have helped to reshape the genre and decolonize the colonial roots of travel writing, which historically has been the purview of

privileged white men exploring what they deemed “uncivilized” or exotic places. I learned that one must be cautious in travel writing to pass oneself off as an expert of a foreign land and customs simply because one has visited these lands.

Likewise, there is an ethical duty to be aware of one’s privileged position when traveling and to listen to indigenous voices that are often overlooked, especially in a country like New Zealand that had formerly been colonized. I read texts such as *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts* by Chadwick Allen, *Voice Carried My Family* and *Weaving Earth and Sky: Myths and Legends of Aotearoa* by Maori poet Robert Sullivan to better understand indigenous perspectives and the Maori history of New Zealand, or as it is known in the Maori language, Aotearoa. The Charles River Editors *British Colonization of New Zealand* helped me understand the complicated history and ongoing imbalance of power between European colonizers and the native Maori. For example, while the early missionaries in New Zealand often worked as liaisons between Maori and Europeans and sought to improve education and health, the irony is that “the missionaries introduced their own corrosive ideologies and practices, and they were no less disdainful of ancient traditional practices than any other” (Chapter “Initial Settlement Activity”).

In my essay “Doubt,” I wrote about my decision to take a teaching position at a new school 30 miles north of where I had taught for the last eleven years. I was leaving the first--and only--teaching job I had ever had. It was the scariest thing I had done in a long time, one which put me face to face with my fear of change and the unknown. I included this essay because it not only describes a slightly different facet of my fear and anxiety, but because it is also a more current example of a time when I overcame my fears and took a risk in the hopes that it would help me change my life for the better. It was a baby step, perhaps a trial run, in the puzzle of

whether or not to stay in the U.P. I felt like it was a pivotal moment in my life, one in which I move forward instead of remaining complacent and stagnant.

The last essay in my thesis is titled “Courage” because I feel that this is the emotional state I’m working towards throughout my thesis. However, I recognize the complicated nature of fear, and I acknowledge in my conclusion that fear is not necessarily something one can vanquish altogether. My success in dealing with my fear has mixed results such as the fact that it took me so long to seek out a new teaching position when I had been unhappy at my old job for quite a few years. But like Parker J. Palmer believes in his book *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*: we can *have* fears, but we cannot *be* our fears. I must constantly remind myself of this as I move through life.

Like Bilbo Baggins once said to Frodo in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door...There is no knowing where you might be swept off to" (102). I, too, had no idea where this thesis project might sweep me off to. In fact, this thesis ended up in a place I never could have envisioned when I first began. Writing this thesis has been quite the adventure--by turns frustrating, challenging, and rewarding--but one which, ultimately, I’m glad I embarked on. It has forced me, in a way, to quit being so apathetic and realize once again that I do have agency over my life and have the strength to take the next step should I decide to.

Crossroads

At 39, single and childless, I was at a pivotal turning point in my life, a crossroads. It was the close of a decade and it felt appropriately portentous. I needed to answer the same question I had been asking myself ever since I returned home after college: should I stay or should I go? Should I stay in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and really try to make a life for myself here or should I leave it behind forever? And if I decided to leave, where would I go? It was a large question--the largest one in my life, too large to be answered in a single night--certainly not one to be answered in the midst of an infectious disease pandemic that had effectively put the entire world's plans on hold. It was as if a giant hand had come down out of the heavens and hit pause. It seemed like a good time to reflect.

For most of the past decade I had lived my life as if I was already on partial lockdown. Apart from sporadic trips abroad during the summer, I never really went anywhere or did anything. Most of my friends were married now and had children, so there wasn't really anyone to do anything with anyway. My life had turned into a dull, monotonous pattern: work, home, more work, sleep. Repeat. It was like being trapped in a tower of my own making, one which I had no idea how to escape. I sometimes felt like the Lady of Shalott, cursed to spend her life weaving the life she glimpsed out her window instead of being a part of it. Always watching and waiting and dreaming but never truly living.

In many ways, the world was before me and in many ways it was not. I had relatively little to tie me to the Upper Peninsula except for my family--a mother, father, and brother--and habit. I had no house, no children, no boyfriend. I could potentially, without too much fuss, pick up and start over somewhere else, yet at the same time, I was almost 40. In the eyes of much of

society, I was middle aged and past my prime. I had not yet become invisible, but it was creeping closer. Like Sylvia Plath described in her poem “The Mirror,” I could feel old age “rising toward [me] day after day, like a terrible fish” (173). This was particularly hard because there were still things I wanted for myself--namely to begin a family of my own. I felt a great sorrow and heaviness attached to being a childless woman near the end of her childbearing years. It was just one more possibility closing forever. One more path I could never walk. I knew I had to make a decision and make it soon. I often wondered why I had never been able to make one before.

But here was part of the problem: By leaving, I knew what would be lost (friends, family, security); I did not know what would be gained. This fear kept me in check--paralyzed almost. So there I stood at the crossroads: if I didn't make up my mind now, I never would.

Inheritance

I come from a long line of worriers. My great grandmother died after jumping out of a moving car because she thought they were going to get in an accident; she was the only one who died. If she had stayed in the car she probably would have lived.

My great grandmother's name was Lillian Mae (Monhead) Gillespie. She was born May 14, 1900 and died November 29, 1944. Her family and her husband's family were tree toppers--loggers who dared climb up and cut the tops of huge pines. They were offered jobs in the Upper Peninsula, but when they finally arrived from Kentucky and lower Michigan, the jobs were taken. Their families survived by moving into abandoned logging camps and living off the land. Lillian had nine children; my grandma, Blanche, was her third youngest. Lillian passed away when my grandmother was only 12 years old. Since my grandmother Blanche's older siblings had already moved out of the house, she had to assume all the duties of a mother and look after her two younger siblings. Blanche's father, who was never able to come to terms with the death of his wife, became a raging alcoholic.

On that fateful winter day just before Christmas, my great grandmother Lillian, her husband, and Ella, one of her twin daughters who was pregnant at the time, rode into town with Lillian's sister and brother-in-law to buy Christmas presents. After shopping, they began their way to pick up my great grandfather who had been dropped off earlier to visit some relatives, but the car slid on ice going around a sharp turn at the bottom of a hill. Lillian and Ella were in the back. As Ella remembers it, Lillian grabbed the door handle, opened the door, and jumped as the car began to slide into the ditch. The car hit a tree and they found my great grandmother laying

on the side of the road, one of her legs nearly torn off, the skin on one side of her body just gone. Ella remembers a stream of blood flowing down the road, presents scattered everywhere.

When the paramedics arrived, Lillian, who was somehow still conscious, told them, “You take care of my Ella first--she’s pregnant!”

Ella said she could hear Lillian screaming in the hospital for 30 minutes before her mother passed away.

My grandmother Blanche was watching her two younger siblings at home that day. She still remembers the lights coming down the road and her brothers acting up more than usual that day. No one told her why her mother didn’t come home. The only thing her father called up to her that night was “Behave yourselves now.”

When Blanche went downstairs the next morning, her father, who rarely cooked, was in the kitchen making pancakes. His words were brief: “Your mother died in a car accident last night.” That was the last time he ever spoke of her.

When I was little, I remember Grandma Blanche, my mother’s mother, fretting at the window any time my brother mowed the lawn on the riding lawnmower or my father plowed the fields on his tractor or even when my brother and I played on the swingset. Her fears seemed unwarranted and irrational. Whenever my family visited her in Felch, a small town near Iron Mountain, we had to call the instant we got home so she knew we had safely made the 1.5 hour drive home from her house.

Social situations--even among her own family--made her edgy and nervous. She loved having her family around her, but at the same time we wore her out, especially at holidays like Christmas. While my brother and I and our five cousins opened Christmas presents on the braided jute rug in the middle of her cramped living room, our gifts piled around us like a

treasure hoard, Grandma would sit quietly in a corner and disappear: bodily she was there, but mentally she was somewhere else. When we gave her a present to open, she would gingerly unwrap it and smile softly and then set it aside. I thought perhaps she never liked any of her gifts, but as I learned more about our family history, I realized that Christmas would forever remind her of her mother's death.

Blanche's nervous tics betrayed her anxious personality. She would chew her nails and twist her permed hair into little loops around her finger. I always remember her with a tissue in her hand--twisting it, teasing it, picking at it like some kind of worry rag until its frayed edges, I imagined, resembled the frayed edges of her nerves. Whenever she sat, she would constantly tap her foot or swing her leg. But she rarely sat, preferring instead to run around the house cleaning. Like my mother, she liked to stay busy. According to my aunt, "Gram was like an ostrich--if she buried herself in work she didn't have time to think. How sad...to be afraid of your own thoughts, good or bad."

If Grandma Blanche had a concrete fear it was a fear of the water, which she hated all her life. When she was 12, the same year she lost her mother, she also lost her best friend in a drowning accident. Then, in her early 20s, when she already had children of her own, Blanche's first cousin's daughters--13 and 15--also drowned. One girl began to struggle in the water. When her sister swam out to help her, as is so often the case when trying to rescue someone in the water, they both drowned.

When my mother, Patsy, and her siblings were growing up they weren't allowed to go above their ankles in the water; whenever they waded out deeper my grandma would have a fit and scream at my grandpa, "Roy, you get those kids out of the water! They are going to drown!" My aunt remembers how when they were little my grandfather would have them put on their

bathing suits underneath their clothes and when my grandmother was busy with the chores, he would sneak them down to the lake to swim.

Years later, in 1981, my grandmother's worst fear came true when she lost her oldest child and only son to the water. My uncle, Tony, was 31 and my twin brother and I were only five months old when Tony passed away. Most of my family believes my uncle had an epileptic seizure while fishing on the bank of a river and drowned, but my aunt, Pammy, thinks he might have just slipped and fell and hit his head on some rocks and been knocked unconscious. She said he had a big gash on his forehead when she went with my grandmother to identify his body.

39 years later, both my aunt and my mother wept as they recalled that day. I felt guilty asking them to relive the trauma of losing their brother so that I could try to understand their pain, their loss. I felt guilty, too, knowing I would write about it, thinking perhaps it wasn't my story to tell, not wanting to get it wrong, but at the same time realizing I would never get it right. But as I listened to my mom, my aunt, my cousin, my father, their memories came together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, each recalling different details that I tried to fit together to recreate that day.

It was late April and the opening day of trout season. Knowing the Upper Peninsula, there was probably still snow on the ground. Tony had gone to Mill Pond, his favorite fishing hole near the Zion Lutheran Church in Felch. It was a beautiful spot beside First Falls on the Sturgeon River. Uncle Tony had been wearing a large parka and heavy Sorel boots, and Aunt Pammy thinks the weight of the parka, sodden with water, kept him under the water while he was unconscious. This was the moment in the retelling that she broke down. I think she imagined that had circumstances been slightly different her brother might have lived, and that is what haunts her the most. Her voice came out in broken, halting sobs; she sounded all of a

sudden like a little girl, and I realized she was not really talking to me anymore but to herself. Lost in the memory, traveling back through the years, she remembered how she drove by the ambulance that carried her brother's body: "I wanted to turn around and catch up to it and say this is all a lie--it has to be--my brother is not in there."

My cousin, Tanya, who had been living with my grandparents at the time and was only nine years old when her father died, remembered the evening Grandma and Papa received the news that her father had drowned. The three of them were sitting around the dinner table when Pastor Buck knocked on the door; she could tell by the look on my grandparents' faces that they knew something horrible had happened. Pastor Buck told them he had news he didn't think Tanya should hear. Papa asked Tanya to go sit on the porch outside the kitchen while the grownups talked, but she could hear everything through the door. When the pastor told my grandma that my uncle was dead Tanya said Grandma howled like a wild animal, that she just kept screaming, "No!" over and over again. Tanya grasped for words to describe Grandma's reaction. "It was...just...*guttural*," Tanya explained.

The day my uncle died was the same day my mother and father had driven downstate to Lansing for my paternal grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary. When they arrived at my grandparents' house Grandpa Keyes met them at the car. My mother went inside while Grandpa Keyes helped my father get the luggage out of the trunk.

"Son," Grandpa said, taking him aside, "I have some sad news. I just got a phone call from Patsy's family. Her brother has drowned."

My mother and Uncle Tony were barely a year apart and very close. Even though Tony was older, because he was sickly as a child, my mom was the one who looked after him. Once, when Tony was afraid to go for a ride on the ferris wheel at the state fair, my mom took his hand

and said, "It'll be okay. I'll be with you." Out of all the siblings, Aunty Pammy said my mom was "the rock."

Once inside my grandparents' house, my father took my mom into the bathroom to tell her that her brother had died. He said she broke down in tears and then called her parents and sisters. My mom remembered leaving Lansing the very next day, but my dad said they stayed a day to rest. What I do know is that when they left, they drove eight hours straight to Felch and met my mother's family at the funeral home for the visitation, which had already begun.

When I spoke to my dad, he recalled the "deafening silence" when they walked in. He said no one was talking, no one was crying, but my mom remembered something entirely different. She said she'll never forget the sound of her father weeping as they walked into the funeral home, or how, afterwards, her mother kept saying, "I always knew I would lose one of my kids to the water."

When I asked my aunt if she noticed a difference in Grandma Blanche after Tony died, she replied, "You don't know the mother I knew." She said that after Tony died, Grandma became more worried, remote, and anxious.

My cousin Tanya, who was raised by my grandparents after her father drowned, thought Grandma may have become stuck--emotionally--at the age of 12 when she lost her mother. She described Grandma as a very emotional, reactive woman; someone who was consistently loving but who could also be very remote--especially when she was in pain. Aunt Pammy, the middle of three sisters, described how after Tony died it was almost like Grandma Blanche just mentally shut down and you couldn't reach her. Blanche never talked about anything deep or painful. She would swat those topics away by saying, "Oh, just leave me alone" or "Let's not talk about that right now." Pammy believed Grandma's inability to confront these traumas was because she

never had time to grieve after her mother Lillian's tragic death. My grandmother lost her mother and became one all in the same day. Only five years later, at the age of 17, she married my much older grandfather and had her first child, Tony, later that year.

My mother's anxiety was a bit more neurotic. Outwardly, she didn't strike me as a fearful person--she was gutsy and bold and certainly did not suffer from the social anxiety that I did, but as I got older I began to realize how much of her worry was internalized, how much of it came out as anger or frustration, how she kept herself busy, like my grandmother, to distract herself from having to confront those fears. Her neurotic tendencies only became worse with age. My mother had a hard time dealing with things that she could not control such as my father's illness; she often felt put upon. "What do you want from me--blood?" is a line I remember both my grandmother and mother saying frequently. My mom could not accept that sometimes things just happened--instead, they always had to be someone's fault.

I remember her once having to pick me up from school when I was in junior high. I had accidentally scratched my cornea when a badminton birdie bounced off my racket into my eye during gym. She had to leave work early to bring me to the doctor. When I got in the car the first thing she said to me was, "I cannot believe you're doing this to me right now. I don't have time for this!" I do not doubt my mother's love or concern for me, but it was almost as if she believed I had hurt myself on purpose to punish her. This was often how she reacted whenever I got sick--and I was sick a lot as a child with recurring bouts of bronchitis and tonsillitis. Each time I came down with something I met with my mother's standard perturbed inquiry: "How can you be sick again? Haven't you been drinking orange juice like I told you to? Why didn't you gargle with salt water? Have you been taking your vitamins?" Yet, after the initial

incrimination, she would take the best care of me: she would make a bed on the couch and bring me endless bowls of chicken soup, glasses of water, and cough drops.

I could also see what my father's multiple sclerosis had done to her, the toll his disease had taken on their marriage. On the surface, my mother often appeared angry and resentful, berating my father for not being able to help around the house, for not taking better care of himself. She constantly scolded him for not drinking enough water, not moving often enough, not going outside to get more sun, not eating better--as if doing those things could somehow reverse the progression of his symptoms. My father was a pretty content, easy-going person, who rarely complained and who had handled his disease with more grace than I would ever be able to muster, but every once in a while my mother's barbed comments pushed him so far that he raged back, "Do you think I want to be like this? Do you think I enjoy my body failing me? Don't you think I would like to be able to help you if I could?"

I think my mom had a lot of hopes for what their retirement years would look like--travel, boating, grandkids. I think she assumed that after retirement life would get easier, but my father's increasing immobility and health issues had worn her down until her fears and sorrows often presented as hostility and resentment. I have realized that feeling helpless and powerless can feel a lot like rage, that like a wounded animal backed into a corner, lashing out in anger is often easier than facing our fears.

As for me, the latest in this line of worriers and fretters, my fears are many and have evolved over the years. When I was young, I had the same fears that I imagine many children had such as fear of the dark or monsters under the bed, but I also suffered from an overactive imagination which perhaps spun my fears out of proportion. For instance, I was terrified of thunderstorms. I could not sleep when storms raged outside. I would lie awake in bed listening

to the rain lash against the window, counting the seconds between the boom of thunder and the flash of light, trying to determine how far away the storm was because someone had once incorrectly told me that every second between the two equaled a mile of distance. During each storm, I was convinced that lightning would strike the house and kill me. So when the lightning got close enough I would run into my parents' room and climb into bed with them.

I think my fear of lightning originated from a story my mother told me when I was little about a relative of ours who was struck and killed by lightning in 1911 when the Felch school burned down during a terrible storm. Carl Dixon was playing outside at recess when a storm kicked up. As he and his sister ran inside the school for protection, lightning struck the school's bell tower and both of them. His sister remained unconscious for 24 hours until her father revived her by throwing cold water on her, but Carl had been killed instantly. There was a large hole burned into his jacket pocket where he had been carrying steel marbles which had served as a conductor for the lightning.

Years later, however, my fear of lightning was solidified when I was almost struck one summer while working at the Baraga State Park. I worked by myself in the booth near the main entrance, checking campers in and out. One particularly humid day, a storm rolled in out of nowhere. The temperature dropped, the wind picked up, and I could see dark clouds racing across the bay. As I ran to shut the firewood box behind the booth before the rain could soak the wood, I remember thinking that I couldn't believe lightning had never struck the huge white pine across from the booth, which was the tallest tree around for miles. I had just made it back to the booth when the rain began to fall in torrents. Lightning flashed down everywhere, and I was about to shut my computer off when the screen sparked and went dark. At the same time, there was a terrifyingly loud crack and a flash of light like an explosion, and I heard something

crashing down. I had just enough time to crouch down and cover my head with my arms when half the white pine tree landed in the road next to the booth and the other half fell onto a motorhome parked beneath it. When the storm cleared, the southern end of the campground was flooded. Thankfully, the older couple in the motorhome had not been hurt. The wife had run to the front of the motorhome just before a branch punched through the ceiling and staked into the bed she had just been laying on. The phone lines were down, so I had to radio my boss at home. I was so shaken up by the experience that when he got to the campground he took one look at me and sent me home.

As I got older, I became more introverted and self-conscious, especially in larger crowds or around people I didn't know. In high school, I had no problem performing in the school play or band concerts. But ask me to give a presentation in front of the class--no way! My teachers fed my parents the same line at parent teacher conferences: "Rebecca is a really great student, but she is so quiet. I wish she would share her thoughts in class!" At science camp in 11th grade I won the award for "quietest camper." When my friends and I attended a weekend retreat with students from other schools from around the Upper Peninsula, I didn't feel comfortable coming out of my shell until the last day when inevitably people would write things in my memory book like "You seem like a really cool person; I wish you would have spoken up sooner."

I attended one school dance in junior high. I was that girl who stood in the back corner like a wallflower, wishing I could just go home but at the same time secretly wishing someone would ask me to dance. When Scott, a new kid from Detroit, who was a head taller than all the other boys in class, dragged me onto the dance floor, I remember the sheer panic and the awkward, robotic slow dance to the *Boyz II Men* hit "End of the Road." I don't think I even danced at my own prom senior year. I was horribly shy around boys I liked, and I remember

never wanting my parents to know who I had a crush on. One Christmas, when I was 14, I received a present that said, “To Rebecca. Love, Brad.” I was absolutely mortified. Brad was the name of an upperclassmen whom I completely adored. I glared at my brother, thinking he must have ratted me out to our parents, although I had no idea how he could have found out my secret unless he had read my diary. I tried to keep my cool, but my hands were shaking as I unwrapped the present. Inside a long, thin tube was a sheet of paper. When I unrolled it, it turned out to be a poster of Brad Pitt from the movie *Legends of the Fall*! I find the memory ridiculous now--mostly because I have no idea why I was so embarrassed that my parents might realize I had crushes on boys. But I had always been a very private person. I think that is why I gravitated towards writing. It was an outlet, a form of expression--I could write the things I could never say.

During my first year of college, I was just as shy as I had ever been. I barely said a word in my discussion sections, and I broke out in a cold sweat each time we had to do “icebreakers” and introduce ourselves in class at the beginning of the semester. My dad had urged me to apply to the Residential College, a much smaller interdisciplinary liberal arts program within the University of Michigan that promised a more intimate experience at a very large university, but one which I ultimately did not pursue because I felt that a) there was no way I would ever get accepted and b) even if I did get in, I wouldn’t be anywhere near as capable as the other students. I wish I had had more confidence in myself back then and the courage to take risks and try new things, but I was always holding myself back, afraid that I would never be good enough or that I might embarrass myself.

Now, I am once again afraid my fears will hold me back from living the life I want to live. I am afraid I will never find the courage to change my life and move forward. I’m afraid

that one day I'll look back and have nothing but regret. I am afraid I will never be able to answer the question, should I stay or should I go, or that when I do decide, I will be unable to follow through.

I came across an article once about what separates humans from animals. The author's position was that it is the human ability to imagine, to think into the future, that separates us from other beasts. I wonder sometimes whether this ability to imagine is both a blessing and a curse. How many of our fears are based on what hasn't yet happened--may never happen? How much pain do we cause ourselves--how much energy do we waste--by imagining future calamities and loss? How many things do we mourn even before they slip through our fingers? I have no doubt animals feel fear and pain and even loss, but sometimes I think what a relief it would be to live unburdened by worries of the future, to live only in the present, to experience what poet Wendell Berry describes as the "peace of wild things / who do not tax their lives with forethought / of grief" (30). I, too, wanted to be calmed by the presence of "still waters" and "day-blind stars" and be free.

I believe grief and worry can be both ancestral and environmental--handed down, sometimes unwittingly, through generations by the stories we tell and how we react to the world. Many of our fears are learned through experience, some taught. How much of it, though, I find myself wondering, is inherited? How much pain is passed on through the blood, like some sort of collective memory? How much had the grief, pain, and loss experienced by my ancestors inadvertently shaped my own life? My brother and I were five months old when my uncle died, my Aunt Pammy was five months pregnant with my cousin Jaime. We were witnesses to the grief around us even if we couldn't make sense of it or even consciously remember it.

This rumination is not meant to lay blame for my own shortcomings and fears on my ancestors, but to think of how trauma, like a stone tossed into a pond, can create barely perceptible reverberations that spread out through the years, coloring our perceptions of and interactions with the world. How had my great grandmother's death affected my 12-year-old grandmother and in turn affected my mother and in turn me? How had my Uncle Tony's death reverberated through my family? How could understanding this intergenerational grief--this inheritance--better help me understand my own fears and doubt?

Doubt

While I am a person of many fears, there have been times in my life when I have been brave; but it is a constant struggle. I'd like to say life is a steady, linear progression--that all of life's lessons, once learned, stick with you for good. But that is not the case--at least not for me. I find life to be full of fits and starts. I find that, despite the confidence I've built over the years, the doubt and anxiety inevitably returns. I often wish I could silence for good the doubting voice that whispers in my ear like a sadistic lover, *you will never be good enough, brave enough, strong enough, beautiful enough*. A voice that cycles through all the reasons why something will never work out instead of thinking of all the ways it possibly could. Every time I look at life, I see all the ways it can hurt me. I see all the ways it can end in failure. These are the pessimistic tendencies I have to guard against. It is exhausting at times--fighting one's true nature. Trying to be more than the sum of my fears--and there are so many. There have always been.

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Two years ago, before I switched schools 11 years into my career teaching high school English (a move that shocked many of my colleagues and the administration), I experienced a crisis of decision or rather a crisis of emotion brought on by my inability to make a decision. I remember the weight of it--like a blanket made of lead bearing me to the earth, crushing me, enveloping me until I felt like I couldn't breathe. I remember swinging back and forth like a pendulum between elation and terror, hope and despair, knowing and helpless confusion. I went for long walks that July--sometimes two, three times a day--to clear my head, as if I could outpace my anxiety and walk myself into an epiphany. I called my closest friends--people who had known me my whole life--on these walks, wearing ruts into the side of the quiet country road

on which I lived, phone pressed to my ear, waving my hands animatedly until the few neighbors must have thought I was nuts. I called my friends because while I was desperate for them to talk me out of taking the job at a new school, I knew how excited they would be for me to get out of the small town I grew up in and move on with my life, to teach at a better school. I knew their encouragement would be the only way to balance out my fears.

Before I submitted my resume, I made an extensive list of pros and cons, praying there would be a clear, logical winner. There wasn't. I'm not proud of this, but at one point during my soul searching I actually googled "Should I leave my teaching job?" It was one step short of asking Alexa or Siri for life advice. The 21st century equivalent of a Magic Eight Ball. It felt like a scene ripe for parody. I imagined a modern-day Hamlet googling "To kill Claudius or not to kill Claudius?" and hoping for resolution--as if that could ever come from outside yourself. Should I stay or should I go? It's the same question I've been asking myself for the last 13 years.

Not surprisingly, my google search didn't provide much clarity. However, there was one useful kernel, embedded in some random woman's blog that stayed with me. She said that fear should never be the reason for not doing something. That decisions based on fear would always be the ones you most regret. Not an earth-shattering epiphany, perhaps, but for someone dogged by fear, it was just the right amount of encouragement I needed to know what I had to do. I had always known what I had to do, but I was afraid that when the time came I wouldn't be strong enough to make the right decision. Which is why I called all my friends, desperate for someone to talk me off the ledge and just as desperate for someone to shove me off it. When I looked back at my list of pros and cons it was like I was trying to invent reasons for why I shouldn't take the new job: legitimate concerns gave way to a host of increasingly ridiculous complaints

such as loss of accumulated sick days (which wouldn't affect me unless I chose to finish out the next 20 years of my career at the same school), or the fact that my new room would be further away from the bathroom and the teachers' lounge, I would miss the view from my old room, the new room had an awful smell--ephemera, really, meant to disguise the truth that accepting a new job would mean significant change. I was trying so hard to convince myself that I should stick with what I had always known because it was safe and easy and comfortable. After a decade at this school I knew exactly where I fit in and what to expect. I was also miserable.

I remember being so angry in those last few years at my old school that I would rant out loud to myself on my drive home--and the 15-minute drive was not nearly long enough to purge the rage from my system. I had worked the last three years without a planning period. That means I taught all seven periods a day. The only break I had was 20 minutes at lunch. It was voluntary, of course, and you were paid extra to teach an extra class period, but when you're given the choice to either have 30+ behaviorally challenged students stuffed in a classroom which was designed to hold 20 students, or teach on your prep, no decision is a good one. One year, I had six different preps--that means I had to prepare lessons for six different classes each day. You never knew what you were teaching from one year to the next. Schedules changed based on the whims of the administration and class sizes. One summer, my principal called me while I was in the middle of a lake kayaking and told me that I would be teaching senior English that fall. I had two weeks to prepare for a course I had never taught before. I wish I could say that was an exception rather than the norm, but in 11 years, I had taught everything from AP Lit. to middle school Study Skills.

The last straw was when they made me teach World History because they didn't feel like replacing the two social studies teachers who had just retired. History had been my minor in

college, but it had been nearly 15 years since I had last studied it. I was an English teacher to my core. I felt it would take me at least five years to become a good history teacher; I didn't know if I had the stamina, and it certainly wasn't fair to the students. I was also running four clubs and taking grad classes after school. I was overworked, underpaid, and burnt out. One morning in the teachers' lounge while trying to stave off a panic attack before first hour, the school nurse asked me when I had last done something fun, and my reaction surprised even me: I burst into tears. I couldn't remember the last time I had done something for myself. I didn't have time to go to the movies or out to dinner or to exercise after school. I didn't have time to read for pleasure or hang out with my friends. I didn't have time to date. All I did was work, and I hated myself.

To be fair, it wasn't all bad. After 11 years, the school was like family--a dysfunctional family--but still one that I cared for. I had grown up in the community--or the one next door--and I understood it on some animal level only a person who had been born and raised there could understand. I knew the families, I knew their names. Both my parents had been teachers in those small communities and so people knew me or at least recognized my name. I understood the politics and the prejudices, the people to avoid and the people whom I could trust. In short, I was established, which brought a certain amount of ease, a certain amount of clout (if public school employees could have such a thing). At a school that had the reputation of being a "revolving door," I was already near the top of the seniority list. I sincerely cared for my students--even the few that tried my patience on a daily basis. I wasn't keen to start over, to be a "newbie," to have to prove myself once again.

I cried off and on for nearly a week after I finalized the decision to take the job at the new school. It's one thing to leave what you know, but to forsake it for something unknown...to walk

away from the past 11 years and all I had built? They say that when one door closes, another one opens. But if that is true, so is its reverse: When one door opens, another one shuts forever. After I tendered my letter of resignation and signed my new contract, the fear closed in and the *What If* game began: what if I had made the wrong decision? What if I liked teaching at this new school even less than I did my old one? What if I couldn't handle the commute? What if the students didn't like me? What if my co-workers were assholes? What if my teaching ability was not up to the standards of this bigger, higher-achieving school? What if I didn't fit in there? Where would that leave me? I was stuck in a hallway and all the doors were closed. Like a contestant on the game show *The Price Is Right*, I didn't know if what lay beyond Door #3 was a sports car, an all-expenses paid vacation to Tahiti, or a hair dryer. This wasn't just a leap of faith for me, it was a plunge. There I was on the ledge, staring into the void, and I could not see the bottom.

Ultimately, hope won out over fear--hope for a better life for myself. I did not want to die single and alone in the small town where I grew up. I knew deep down that taking a job at a more academic-oriented school in a bigger community was the first step to moving forward with my life. I knew that if I could not take this risk now, I would never leave. The experience was traumatic, it was emotional, and it was not without a certain sense of loss, but after two years, I can say that switching schools was the right decision--that even if I'm still not exactly where I want to be, I am that much closer. I was fearful throughout the process, but I was not undone by my fears.

Go North

Thirteen years earlier, I had taken the biggest risk of my life by moving to New Zealand for three months.

On our second day in Auckland, we sat down with a young travel coordinator at our hostel to nail down our itinerary. We told him we had just over two weeks to see both islands. He raised his eyebrows and looked back and forth between Catherine and I, two small, pale girls fresh out of the frigid northern hemisphere. He seemed amused. It wouldn't be the first time someone had underestimated us. I knew trying to cover both islands in two weeks was pushing it, but I had come too far to be deterred now. Catherine and I had both come with a bucket list; mine was twice as long as hers. Instead of a weekend warrior, I tended to be a trip warrior. My travel philosophy was *more is more*. Plane tickets were expensive--especially to New Zealand--and time was precious. I knew that when I began student teaching in a few weeks, I would have little time to travel further afield. I wanted to see as many sides of New Zealand as I could--from the mountains, glaciers, and fjords in the south to the subtropical forests, bubbling volcanic activity, and golden beaches in the north. And if I could track down a few hobbit holes from the movie sets of *Lord of the Rings*, all the better.

The travel coordinator must have sensed our resolution because with a practiced snap of his wrist, he shook out a map and plopped it on the table in front of us. "Right, let's see what we can do for you girls!"

We were advised to go north. To the Bay of Islands, a glittering jewel of blue waters and emerald islands that rise from the sea like humped turtles' backs. After deciding against the hop-on, hop-off Kiwi Experience bus tour I am convinced hostels are given kickbacks to promote, we

decided to rent our own car. This would eat into our budget, but it would give us the freedom to go where we wanted, when we wanted. At 25 and 26, Cat and I were just on the other side of doing anything to save a buck. The idea of sharing a bus packed with gap-year teenagers more intent on partying than savoring all a country had to offer was no longer appealing.

At the rental agency, I eyed our economy car dubiously. It was a girly, toothpaste green two-door Toyota Yaris which I instantly dubbed *The Mint Julep*. Part of me wondered if this was the car they reserved specifically for female roadtrippers. It was the size of a clown car; our luggage took up nearly the entire back seat and the trunk was great if you wanted to hide your purse. I grew up driving ATVs larger than this car, but as we fought our way through the busy morning commute and crossed the Auckland Harbour Bridge, going north on Highway 1, the sparkling waters of Waitemata Harbour all around us, my doubt gave way to giddy excitement. I was thrilled to be on the open road. It felt like our adventure had finally begun.

It had been two years since Catherine and I had last seen each other--when Cat had flown to San Francisco to visit me after my year-long stint as a nanny in the Bay Area. We had taken our first road trip then, following California's famed Highway 1 south to San Luis Obispo. We first met two years before that as exchange students in Sweden. Catherine was from Portsmouth, England, and we bonded over swimming at the local gym and seeing movies at the cinema during the endless winter nights in Uppsala. Catherine loved browsing the department store beauty counters, sampling the skin creams and spritzing fragrances until we emerged into the crisp Scandinavian air smelling like a many-layered floral shop. Sometimes we would try on outrageous outfits we had no intention of buying and not just because we didn't have any money. It was fun to don new clothes and imagine ourselves as other people--like trying on alternate personalities. Our outfits were sometimes posh, sometimes slutty, and often just bizarre. I

remember trying on a pair of tight, flared jeans that were laced up the sides with leather. I paired it with an intricate blouse and a leather vest with fringe. I looked like a cowgirl in drag.

Three times a week we would eat pizza that tasted faintly like cigarettes from the divey cafe on the ground level of the giant dorm complex known as Flogsta. The food was awful but dirt cheap and more convenient than cooking our own meals. In the evenings when we weren't hanging out in the communal kitchen, we'd take turns reading *Harry Potter* out loud, trying on each other's accents. Catherine's American accent had a weird drawl that made her sound like she was from Texas; when I tried out a British accent, she said I sounded too "posh." Until then my main exposure to British culture was through Masterpiece Theater on Public TV 13. I thought all Brits sounded like Queen Elizabeth.

On Friday nights, we would "pregame" it at the dorms before going dancing at "the nations"--student-run organizations that reminded me of an adult version of homeroom. Most nations had their own pub and were meant to help students socialize outside the classroom and create a sense of belonging at Sweden's largest university. There was one nation for each region in Sweden. Traditionally, Swedes had to join the nation of the region they were from, but being international students meant we could choose which nation to belong to. We would meet up with a constantly shifting band of international students and hop from nation to nation looking for the best scene. Each nation finished the night by playing Abba's "Dancing Queen." To this day, hearing that song instantly transports me back to Sweden; I can close my eyes and still remember the sensation of spinning drunkenly as strobe lights flashed hypnotically across the dark room, the sweaty bodies pulsing as everyone shouted in unison, "You can dance / You can jive / Having the time of your life" like some modern Viking anthem. The dance over, we'd spill out into the night, the Swedish guys pissing in the streets (seriously, it was a thing!), and climb

onto our rickety, second-hand bikes and pedal unsteadily back to the dorms, trying not to wipe out on the icy sidewalks.

Our weeknights were a bit tamer; we'd often watch movies on the computer in the Swedish boy's room across the hall from Catherine. Steffan was a bit nerdy and seemed to relish the presence of two foreign girls even if it was just to watch movies in his room. I actually went on a date with Steffan my last night in Sweden. It seemed like a silly idea since I was flying home the next day and nothing would ever come of it (like most of my brief, romantic encounters), but he had asked and I had never been on a "date" before. I had butterflies in my stomach the entire bike ride to the cinema, and I was so anxious that I didn't relax until halfway through the 3-hour movie. We saw the second film in the *Lord of the Rings* installment. It was Peter Jackson's series, in fact, that first brought New Zealand to my attention. Like many people, I left the theater wondering what place on earth could possibly be that gorgeous, and I knew one day I had to see it.

As Catherine and I drove through the dense, hilly suburbs north of Auckland on our way to Paihia, the "gateway to the Bay of Islands," I marveled that four years later not only were we still friends, but that there we were on the other side of the world traveling through New Zealand together. I think we both were looking for an excuse to wander the world, to have one last adventure before transitioning into the adult phase of our lives--I was completing my student teaching and would need to begin the search for a job that summer, and Catherine had just decided to leave her municipal job she felt she was completely unqualified for to go back to school to become a teacher. We had both struggled to find our way after graduating from college.

I, for one, had no idea what to do with my English degree. Most of my friends had opted for grad school or followed their boyfriends across the country to their new jobs. A few others decided to teach English overseas. That summer after graduation, I continued to waitress at an Ethiopian restaurant in downtown Ann Arbor and grew increasingly anxious as, one by one, my friends moved away. All of a sudden, the house I had shared with my closest friends for the last two years was populated by strangers. I didn't want to be the only one left behind, the only one without a plan. I had actually been in the process of looking into teaching abroad or obtaining an emergency certificate to teach in Florida when my cousin called and asked me to come to California to be her nanny. I have no doubt this scheme was cooked up by my mother and aunt, but at the time it had seemed like a lifeline. I was completely unsure of myself and what I wanted next in life, so I saw it as a way to save some money (because at that point I was completely broke), while reconnecting with my cousin (whom I didn't know very well since she was 13 years older than me) and establishing residency in California in case I decided to attend grad school the following year.

Catherine, on the other hand, was still reeling from a broken heart. Although at the time I didn't know the full extent of her breakup, I could tell from her letters how unhappy she was. After uni, she had moved with her boyfriend Andy to Norwich, near the east coast of England. I don't think she had many friends there, and Andy didn't seem very supportive. Cat sounded lonely and depressed, and after six months Andy broke up with her. After nine months, Catherine realized Andy was never going to love her and it was time to move on. She moved out and bounced around between flats and roommates, taking the train home to stay with her parents each weekend. Cat's post-uni life had its fair share of rootlessness and disappointment.

It felt good to be reunited. Like any long-distance friendship, we tried our best to keep in touch. Before the age of Face Time and What's App, that mostly meant emailing and the occasional letter--an artform we both agreed was being (or was already) lost. We sent packages on birthdays and at Christmas; it was sort of like having a pen pal. I think we made our friendship work on some level because we didn't have anyone else. Despite the fact that she lived across an ocean from me, she had been there for some very pivotal moments in my life. She had been there with me in Sweden when my father first told me he had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

We were in the middle of watching a movie in Steffan's room when my dad had called. My parents rarely called me while abroad. I knew from the tone of my dad's voice that something was wrong, so I excused myself and went to Catherine's room to be alone. He asked me if I was sitting down. I'll never forget his next words: "We need to talk." My blood ran cold. When had we ever *needed* to talk? Growing up, I had never needed *the*--or any--"talk." I was a straight-A student who didn't break curfew (to my knowledge, unlike my brother, I didn't even have a curfew simply because it never came up). I didn't sneak out to meet up with boys or go to late-night parties. I only had two rules growing up: no makeup and no dating till you're 16. So if I wasn't in trouble, why did we need to talk?

Those four simple words should be banned from the English language--nothing good can ever follow them. It's not like anyone is going to come up to you and say, "We need to talk--you just won the lottery!" Or "We need to talk. I've decided you deserve a promotion." When have you ever heard anyone say, "Hey, we need to talk; would you marry me?" No, when your boss says "we need to talk" she takes you into her office, closes the door, and tells you you're fired. When your boyfriend says "we need to talk" it means he's about to break up with you. When

your father phones you out of the blue from the other side of the Atlantic and asks you to sit down and says “we need to talk” he’s going to tell you someone you love is dead. At least that’s what I feared with every thud of my heart. The child in me didn’t want to hear what my dad had to say, but the burgeoning adult knew I had to hear him out no matter how much I would want the news unsaid.

“Honey, I went to the doctor. I’ve been feeling tired a lot lately and stumbling sometimes when I walk...just not feeling like myself. They ran some tests and, well...found out I have MS.”

I couldn’t register right away what that meant. MS? All I could picture was the teenage boy in a wheelchair back when I was in elementary school who had muscular dystrophy. He wore a brace that propped him up in the electric wheelchair he controlled by using a joystick. His shriveled limbs and twisted body haunted me as a child. When my dad, who was also our school’s guidance counselor, told me what was wrong with the boy, the first thing I wanted to know was whether or not he would live. “He has a severe form of the disease,” my father said. “He probably won’t make it to 30.”

My father was still talking on the other end of the phone, telling me about the disease, but I could barely hear him over the knocking in my chest.

“Is it fatal?” I interrupted, feeling like that scared 10-year-old girl again.

There was a pause.

“No--at least, hopefully, not for a long time.”

Catherine, Steffan, and Aila, another girl from the University of Michigan we used to hang out with, must have finished the movie while I was talking to my dad because they knocked on the open door and came into the room. I had tried my best to keep it together while I was on the phone with my dad, but now that he had hung up, I burst into tears. Steffan took one look at

me, mumbled some excuse, and scampered back to his room. Aila and Catherine sat next to me on the bed; Aila held my hand while Catherine handed me a packet of tissues. I was embarrassed to have to share my grief with them but at the same time comforted by their presence.

I felt comforted once again to have such a good friend by my side as we wound our way down into Paihia, a small, touristy beach town situated in Northland. Northland, New Zealand's northernmost region, is where the Maori, descendants of Polynesian voyagers, are believed to have first settled in the 11th century. And it was there in the Bay of Islands that one of New Zealand's most important documents--the Waitangi Treaty--was signed in 1840. The treaty, named after the grounds on which it was signed, is considered the founding document of New Zealand, one which was meant to govern relations between the British Crown and native Maori tribes. The treaty, however, is not without controversy as there are noteworthy discrepancies between the English and Maori language versions--what the English version refers to as British "sovereignty," the Maori version translates as "governance." Let's just say that the two parties had two completely different understandings of what the treaty entailed. The British wanted absolute control in return for promising Maoris full equality as British subjects while the Maoris believed they would retain their chieftainship and local rights of government. In 1975 the Waitangi Tribunal was established to look into government breaches in the contract and to make reparations for Maori land and resources that were taken illegally or unfairly. To this day, Waitangi Day on February 6 is a day of both celebration and protest.

On the northern outskirts of town, a 30-minute walk along the beach from our hostel, Catherine and I visited the treaty grounds whose main attractions, besides the significance of the location itself, were a colonial house belonging to the former first "British Resident in New

Zealand” James Busby, a Maori meeting house featuring traditional carvings from many Maori tribes or *iwi*, and a *waka*, a war canoe. We had arrived a half hour before closing time and had the place nearly to ourselves. It felt great to wander around the grounds in silence. There were signs directing us to take off our shoes before entering the traditional timber meeting house or *whareniui*. Both the *whareniui* and the *waka* were built in 1940 as part of the Waitangi Day centenary celebrations, and both were masterpieces of Maori carving skills. I was especially impressed by the sleek, black and red ceremonial war canoe that was over 100 feet long--so long I struggled to fit it in my camera frame--that could hold up to 150 paddlers. It was carved from the trunks of three kauri trees and took three weeks to haul out of the forest. I bent down to look more closely at the intricate patterns and graceful whorls that seemed cut by laser rather than carved by hand. Along the canoe’s flank, fierce faces with protruding tongues and wild eyes seemed to challenge me. I found myself trying to mimic the carvings’ frightening expressions, wondering if I could be that fierce when Catherine rounded the corner.

“Rebecca, I was wondering if we should get supper. I’m starv--” she trailed off when she saw me. “*What* are you doing?”

“Nothing,” I said sheepishly, standing up straight.

“Really, because it looked like you were trying to--”

“Nope. Don’t know what you’re talking about. Well, should we grab some dinner?” I asked, already walking away.

~

The next day we were up early to tour the northernmost tip of New Zealand. In order to maximize our time and minimize our stress we decided to go with a tour operator rather than drive ourselves. Often on packaged tours it can feel like all you do is hop on and off the bus to

snap a few pictures before driving to the next location to do it all over again. There are long waits to use the bathroom, bad food, and dull commentary. Nevermind that you don't get to choose your traveling companions. I am glad to say our 12-hour tour to Cape Reinga and back was nothing like that. A lot of it had to do with our rather unconventional tour guide and bus driver, Spike, and the fact that our relatively small 4x4 bus held only 20 passengers. Plus, we got to see and do some amazing things that day. Our first stop: the rainforest--after we stopped at a cafe to grab a coffee and use the bathrooms. Some conveniences you just can't do without.

True to form, it was raining when we got to the rainforest. Luckily, what began as a deluge slowed to a fine mist. The residual moisture made the forest look so green and alive you could almost imagine it breathing. It was dark under the dense canopy, and Catherine and I huddled under her umbrella as we walked along a raised boardwalk into the depths of the forest, eagerly anticipating the sighting of Tane Mahuta, "Lord of the Forest."

Like everything in New Zealand--attitude, adventure, landscapes--even the trees were big. While the kauri trees of New Zealand may not be the tallest, they are some of the biggest (by circumference) and oldest trees in the world--and when I say old I mean *biblical!* Te Matua Ngahere--"Father of the Forest"--is estimated to be between 2,500 and 3,000 years old. Kauri trees can reach heights of over 150 feet and are second in size only to the California sequoias. I would soon learn that to stand beneath a kauri tree and follow its massive, ramrod-straight trunk up and up and up to gaze into its canopy that tops the tree like a green crown of tangled roots is to stare into the heavens. It took no stretch of the imagination to understand why the Maori believe they are sacred. They named the largest living Kauri tree in the world after the Maori god of the forest, Tane Mahuta. Maori creation stories tell how Tane Mahuta separated his parents Ranginui (the sky father) and Papatūānuku (the earth mother) to create light and space.

To do so he lay on his back and pressed his feet against his father, lifting him up as he pushed his hands into the soil of the earth, pressing his mother down, separating the two forever, thus creating the world.

Tane Mahuta and roughly three quarters of New Zealand's surviving kauri trees are located in the subtropical rainforest of Waipoua on the west coast of North Island. Not a five minute walk from the parking lot, along raised boardwalks that are meant to protect the kauri's fragile root system from hikers and hordes of eager tourists, Tane Mahuta emerged from the surrounding vegetation and soared over 168 majestic feet into the air. Its trunk had a girth of 46 feet. It would take at least eight people, each with an arm span of six feet, interlocking hands, to fully wrap around the base of the tree. Experts estimate Tane Mahuta to be nearly 2,000 years old. Four other giant kauri trees in the Waipoua Forest are at least 1,000 years old. Walking beneath those towering giants was like stepping back into the time of the dinosaurs with all of its lush, gargantuan vegetation. Unfortunately, the grandeur of the kauri tree pales in comparison only to the scale of its destruction.

As we walked along the forest track, Spike told us how Kauri forests once blanketed the North Island, an army of colossal sentinels providing protection and habitat for the large and small flightless birds of New Zealand. But as is often the case with the arrival of humans to a new environment, large scale devastation of indigenous species--including plants--soon followed. Similar to the fate of the moa, a large, flightless bird twice the size of an ostrich, which was hunted to extinction within 200 years of the first arrival of humans in the 11th century, early European settlers cut the trees to clear land for farmland and grazing. Kauri wood was highly prized for the ease of its workability. Maori used kauri wood for carving, boat building, and homes, but it was extensive logging during colonial times in the 19th and early

20th centuries that almost obliterated these ancient trees whose vertical, nearly limbless trunks were ideal for ship spars and building timber. Even the tree's gum (which bleeds from the tree and acts as a bandage as the tree tries to heal itself from a wound) was harvested and used in the manufacture of varnish and linoleum. "Gum bleeders" would climb the trees with spiked hammers and boots to collect the gum. They would make cuts at intervals on the trunk and then later collect the solidified gum. This practice was eventually outlawed as it led to infection and the death of many trees.

The extent of the destruction of the kauri was not brought home to me, however, until I visited Te Papa, New Zealand's national museum, in Wellington. One display within the museum estimated that less than 2% of the 1.2 million hectares of kauri forests that once stood are left. Thankfully, it is now illegal to cut them down. However, a new danger threatens the lives of the remaining trees. Kauri dieback disease is a type of fungus or water mold that can sense a kauri's root system and swim through the soil to infect the tree. Discovered in 2009, it only takes a pinhead of soil to spread the fungus which eventually cuts off the nutrient and water supply of the tree, effectively "starving" it. A tree may look healthy for many years before its canopy begins to die off and the tree's fate is sealed. The government and local Maori tribes have launched a campaign to educate human visitors and limit the potential threat to the last remaining stands of kauri trees. Visitors to the forests must stay on designated paths, avoid walking on kauri roots, and disinfect their shoes at trailside cleaning stations before and after visiting kauri sanctuaries. Some of the tracks have even been closed to the public to better protect trees judged at high risk for the spread of infection.

I could have spent all day walking through the beautiful forest, communing with the trees. There was something so humbling about standing beneath such huge and ancient living

things, some of which were alive at the height of the Roman Empire. It was like standing beneath a sky full of stars, trying to reconcile your infinitesimal, puny existence in the face of something so vast and unchanging. I found it oddly reassuring and I hated to leave. But Cape Reinga beckoned, and I had a feeling Spike was not the kind of guide to wait for anyone.

While sharing the last row of seats at the back of the bus, Catherine and I made friends with Jen, a solo traveler from San Francisco who had almost missed the tour that morning as it departed Paihia. I marveled at Jen's ability to write in her notebook despite bouncing up and down as Spike barreled along a 54-mile stretch of beach misleadingly named Ninety Mile Beach. The beach was an official "highway" complete with a 100 km speed limit. Anyone with a private car (rentals weren't allowed) could drive down the beach as long as they made sure they did so at least 2.5 hours on either side of high tide, but it seemed to me like you'd really want a 4-wheel drive vehicle or a local guide. There were warning signs near the streambeds that emptied into the Tasman Sea that read "Danger: Speed Up" which at first seemed counterintuitive until I saw a few rusted cars that had met their end in the quicksand surrounding the streams.

As Spike floored it across one of the larger streambeds, the bus shuddered. Everyone gasped in unison as the violent jolt sent us airborne, but the effect was amplified in the very back. Catherine and Jen slid onto the floor, but being in the middle of the last row with nothing to impede my momentum, I was launched two feet in the air and experienced an exhilarating millisecond of weightless freefall before landing in the aisle three seats down. The old couple I landed next to looked alarmed, but I couldn't stop laughing. Flying through the air had given me that same fluttery feeling--you know, when your stomach is suddenly in your throat--I had had when going over dips in the road as a kid, my brother and I yelling to our mom from the backseat

to drive “faster, faster!” so we could experience the sensation again. There was something so novel and wonderfully amusing about driving down a beach that was a designated highway by a tour guide that looked like a surfer complete with board shorts and bare feet who had spent the morning talking about his sore “gonads.” After the bumpy ride, I now understood why they might have been sore.

Further up the coast, Spike parked the bus on a firm piece of sand, and we all got off to explore the beach. The rain had let up, but it was still a moody, overcast morning. Catherine and I walked towards a large outcropping of jagged rocks to watch the cantankerous ocean swells crash against them. I was bummed that I couldn’t quite capture the waves’ true height and ferocity with my camera. Stubbornly, I persisted, finger poised over the shutter--waiting for the precise moment the ocean spray would be at its highest (Spike had warned us to watch out for every seventh wave because “those were the big ones”) when a voice materialized beside me out of the mist, startling me.

“The sea’s a bitch, but she’s a beaut.”

I lowered my camera. Spike stood beside me, arms crossed, a child’s blue plastic beach bucket dangling from his hand. While he gazed out at the sea like some solemn lover, I found myself trying to work out how old he was. There was no doubt in my mind he spent his off days surfing because the sun had turned his skin a deep leathery brown, but he also had one of those faces (and personalities) that would always read as boyish. He was no doubt crude: earlier on the bus he had regaled us with stories of the time he ate so much fruit in Kerikeri it gave him “the shits.” He also compared kiwi fruit to “brown, hairy bollocks” and the kiwi bird to Barbara Streisand--“big nosed with a fat arse”--but I found his candor and inappropriate humor charming.

“What’s with the bucket?” Catherine asked him as he turned back towards the bus.

“Lunch,” he said with a grin and sauntered away.

With the tide out, we dug for shellfish (better known in New Zealand as *tuatuas*) in the wet sand. Spike taught us how to locate them by looking for tiny holes in the sand that reminded me of giant pores in the skin. When the surf receded, we had to be quick--burrowing our hands into the sand faster than the clams trying to escape us, which was harder than it sounded. One second my fingers were grazing the shell of a tuatua and the next it was gone, and all I had to show for my effort was a handful of mud. I had always loved foraging for mushrooms and berries with my mother in the woods near our house, but it was much more exciting when the food could get away. After a while I got the hang of it and yelled in triumph each time I pulled the smooth, almost mossy-colored shell of a tuatua out of the sand. Although this was the first live “meal” I’d ever caught for myself, I couldn’t bring myself to eat one. I drew the line at raw, slimy seafood and promptly gave my catch to Spike who slurped it straight from the shell and swallowed it whole. There were a few adventurous travelers like Jen who were brave enough to eat a raw clam (she said it tasted like the ocean), but most of us gladly threw our clams into Spike’s plastic bucket.

“Good on ya, mates!” Spike said looking at his nearly full bucket. “Really, great job, but I think that’s enough for one day. Tide’s coming in soon and we don’t want to be here when she does.”

After another bumpy ride up the coast in our bouncy house on wheels, we turned off at Te Paki Sand Dunes just south of Cape Reinga. Now, I am not a daredevil. I do not naturally seek out adrenaline-boosting experiences in order to feel more alive. I have never wanted to jump out of an airplane or ski down the Swiss Alps. I don’t particularly like roller coasters--especially the ones that go upside down--and sometimes just stepping on board a plane is a panic

attack waiting to happen. I don't necessarily think of myself as a coward so much as a cautious person who suffers from an overactive imagination. I have a tendency to play out wild scenarios in my head and for some reason they never end well. So boogie boarding down monster sand dunes in New Zealand that can reach up to 150 meters in height was not something I was prepared for. To be fair, this activity was listed on the itinerary for the day trip to Cape Reinga, so my "unpreparedness" was most likely the result of being a math-challenged American unable to convert meters to feet in her head. In case you were wondering, 150 meters is roughly 500 feet. For reference, the Statue of Liberty is 305 feet tall.

Halfway up the nearly vertical climb (which Jen likened to doing the StairMaster on level 15), I made the mistake of looking back and wondered if I wasn't perhaps tempting fate. But there was no turning back now unless I wanted to be the only one left standing with the 80-year-old couple next to the now ant-sized bus.

"What about that hill over there?" I inquired, noticing a large group of khaki-clad tourists piling out of a pristine charter bus twice the size of our 4-wheel-drive jalopy. With its tinted windows and white and red paint job it would have looked more at home parked outside a rock concert than the remote and dusty sand dunes. "Shouldn't we maybe, I don't know, practice on a smaller hill first?" I asked, giving Spike my most winning smile.

Spike stopped his climbing and turned to look at me. Physically, he reminded me of a tall, gangly and overly-tanned version of Iceman played by Val Kilmer in the 1980s action hit *Top Gun*, complete with aviators and spiky bleach-blond hair. Lowering his glasses, he looked me over from head to toe as if sizing me up. "No worries, love," he said, giving me *his* most winning smile, his large white teeth glowing against his burnt skin. "That hill's for babies. You're with Spike now, and you're going to get the Spike experience!" He winked, slid his

aviators back up, and started whistling as he continued to step-dig his way up the mountain of sand which was so steep you literally had to carve each step out of the hillside.

I glanced longingly one last time at the “baby” hill he so readily dismissed and realized the only way I was getting down this dune was by boogie board or body bag. What is stronger-- fear or pride? There is a reason pride comes before the fall, sometimes quite literally. But there was no way I was doing the walk of shame back down this dune, avoiding the pitying glances of my fellow travelers, branded for the day with the epithet “The Girl Who Wussed Out.” I was in New Zealand now, and I had to act like a Kiwi. Adventure was my middle name. Danger was my game. I was the master of my fate, the captain of my--

“Er, excuse me, miss...?”

A portly, bespectacled father holding the hands of two young children stared up at me. He nodded politely to the mountain at my back. Apparently, I was holding up the line. I tried to smile reassuringly at the two kids, but only managed to grimace. I took a deep breath, adjusting the boogie board strapped across my back, and turned to follow Spike up “Mount Doom.”

When I reached the top, I was too out of breath to enjoy the view. I was vaguely aware of the Tasman Sea to my right, endless dunes off to my left, and a bunch of tourists bent over, gasping and wheezing like I was. Spike leaned lazily against his boogie board planted upright in the sand, an amused grin plastered on his face. When we’d managed to catch our breaths, Spike demonstrated how to lie face-down on the board: hands gripping the upper edge; arms, torso, and upper thighs resting on the board; legs and feet dangling in the sand. He showed us how to dig our feet perpendicularly into the sand to slow down and steer. Safety training was brief:

“Whatever happens, don’t let go!” I looked around in alarm. Surely there was more to it than

that--a five-minute video, a helmet, some sort of tuck-and-roll maneuver in case we did indeed “let go,” a place, at least, to stash our insurance card for the inevitable trip to the hospital.

“Who’s going first?” Spike asked enthusiastically, looking over at me.

Too late! I had already made eye contact; there was no getting out of this now.

“C’mon, love!” he coaxed, beckoning me over. “First up, first down, first to buy a round!” he said cheerfully as he pried the boogie board from my death-like grip and dropped it in the sand.

Kneeling down, I carefully positioned myself on the board and peered over the brink. I could barely make out our 4x4 Dune Rider vehicle parked next to the stream that ran out to Ninety Mile Beach and into the sea. The next stop on our day trip was Land’s End at Cape Reinga. In the Maori language, “Reinga” means “underworld.” The Maori believe it is the place where the spirits of their dead leave this world. Perversely, I thought how I might soon be joining them.

“What happens if I don’t slow down before the stream?” I asked anxiously, worst-case scenarios once again running through my head. I kept fidgeting on the board trying to work out if I was in the right position.

“You get wet!” Spike said with a gleam in his eye and shoved me over the precipice.

As I flew down the mountain of sand that seemed to only get steeper with each passing second, Spike yelled, almost as an afterthought, “Best not drag your feet, love! The sand is like sandpaper--your skin will come right off!”

“What?!” I shrieked, then spit out a mouthful of sand. As the sand flew up and pelted me in the face, I quickly realized there would be no screaming on this downhill adventure. I also realized that I wasn’t slowing down. When I shot past the parked bus and the surprised old

couple standing next to it and saw the stream rushing toward me (well, I suppose I was rushing toward it) I panicked. I decided to risk using my feet as an anchor and dug in. I stopped just short of the stream, but Spike's warning was fairly warranted. The top layer of skin on all my toes had come right off, leaving them raw and pink. I looked like a burn victim. I ended up having to wear flip flops for most of the trip as my toes healed, but I didn't care--not then anyway. I had survived! I had faced my fears and gone headfirst down that giant dune, and it was exhilarating.

Adrenaline coursing through my body, I ran over to Catherine and Jen who had just finished their runs.

"Holy Shit! That was incredible!" Jen said, shaking the sand from her hair.

"I would have screamed," Catherine laughed, "but I kept getting facefuls of sand."

As I was showing the girls my angry-looking toes, Spike, who had waited for everyone else to go down first, came down the dune. He showed us all up, of course, by boogie boarding down on his knees. He did a theatrical spin at the bottom then jumped up and gave a little bow when people started clapping.

"Well, loves," he said, coming over to Catherine, Jen, and I, "how was it?"

I showed him my toes.

"Chur, good on ya!" he exclaimed, holding up his hand for a high five. "Now you've got a real souvenir to take home! Well, girls," he said, grabbing his boogie board and walking back towards the sanddune, "who's up for another run?"

I surprised myself by being the first one to raise her hand.

Twenty five minutes later, I was still waiting for the adrenaline to wear off (partly due to the residual effects of sandboarding but also Spike's NASCAR driving along the steep, twisting

gravel road) when we arrived at Cape Reinga, the most accessible northernmost point of New Zealand. (Technically, North Cape, to the east, is slightly further north, but it is a scientific reserve and not open to the general public.) Scenically, the place was stunning--everything you hoped Land's End would be. Behind us, we were surrounded by lush green valley. To our left stretched a thin spit of land known as Cape Maria van Diemen, and in front of us the vast, windswept ocean pounded the rugged cliffs. Luckily, the clouds broke up as we pulled in and we could just make out a long, white line of surf where the green Tasman Sea met the deeper blue of the Pacific. Down a short paved path near the end of the point stood a picturesque white lighthouse.

Spiritually, Cape Reinga or Te Rerenga Wairua (*the leaping-off place of spirits*) holds great significance to the Maori. According to Maori mythology, the spirits of their dead are said to travel up the coast to this sacred place before sliding down the roots of an ancient pohutukawa tree into the underworld. The spirits then travel underwater to the Three Kings Islands, which can sometimes be seen on the horizon on a clear day. There the spirits turn around to say their last farewell before returning to Hawaiki, the land of their ancestors. As we walked further down the path towards the lighthouse, we could indeed see a lonely, gnarled tree precariously clinging to the rocky face of a cliff. I could not believe a tree could grow in such harsh conditions let alone survive for 800 years. There had been signs up by the carpark asking people to refrain from eating due to the sacredness of this site, yet we passed an oblivious family munching on apples and sandwiches in the grass just off the path. I was secretly relieved when I heard their Aussie accents.

Halfway to the lighthouse, we were halted on our walk by a sudden commotion. A group of people had gathered and were pointing out to sea. I strained my eyes, wondering what all the

fuss was about when I heard the word *shark*! Perhaps nothing fires the imagination quite like the word shark--especially when you haven't grown up around the ocean. Thanks to Steven Spielberg and his terrifying film *Jaws*, the only image I could conjure up was a 20-foot great white. I raced over to the edge of the cliff hoping to see a real, live shark in the wild, but I couldn't see anything. Jen claimed she could see dark shadows just under the surface, but I felt let down. It was just like the time I had been in Yellowstone with my family as a kid. We'd pulled over to the side of the road when we saw a heap of other cars already parked. Usually that was an indicator of a grizzly sighting, but when the park ranger let me look through his binoculars, all I saw were boulders in a field. Skunked once again I thought to myself.

Though it was only a 10-minute walk from the bus down to the lighthouse, by the time we got down there a wall of fog had rolled in off the sea, obliterating everything. It was downright eerie. Where once there had been a beautiful seascape, now there was nothing--just dense, chilly, gray fog. It was like being wrapped in cotton candy--even people's voices sounded muffled. I quite literally felt like I was at the ends of the earth. That feeling was heightened by a yellow signpost with arrows pointing in all different directions, displaying the distance to major cities around the world such as London, Tokyo, and Sydney. According to the sign, Los Angeles was 10,479 km away. The South Pole: 6, 211 km. New Zealand truly was an isolated country.

After the cape, it was a short drive to a picnic lunch in a protected cove on the other side of Cape Reinga. Jen sat with Catherine and I as we ate, perched on some rocks overlooking the sea. Despite being a fairly guarded and introverted person, I fell into easy conversation with Jen. She was a good listener and the kind of person you didn't mind opening up to because she was sweet and sincere and knew just the right questions to ask to keep you talking. While Catherine went for a walk along the rocky beach, we talked about my struggle to figure out what I wanted

to do with my life and my eventual decision to become a teacher. Jen thought it was a noble and selfless career, which I had never really thought about before. But I suppose when you compare a teacher's salary to someone's working in the tech sector in Silicon Valley, it can begin to seem like charity. She told me that she would have liked to have gone into teaching herself, but she didn't think she was brave enough. Now it was my turn to marvel. Jen--not brave enough?! How could she think that? She was in the middle of a nearly two-year solo trek around the world. She had already visited 30 countries and her next stop was Antarctica. She seemed to me to be the epitome of fearlessness and confidence. When I told her so, she laughed.

"I think people just have different tolerances for risk," she said, popping another cracker with hummus in her mouth. "I don't think you give yourself enough credit. You're here, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but I have Catherine and I'm staying with a host family and--"

"Look," she said, cutting me off, "how many people ever really go--even when they have the chance? You could have done your student teaching in America, but you decided to come here. Besides," she continued, "you're about to start working with a hundred moody, impulsive teenagers--talk about risk!"

When I asked her what had led to her decision to do something as bold as to travel around the world alone, she told me her mother had died a few years before from cancer and left her and her sister money for getting married. Rather than wait for a wedding that might never happen, Jen had decided instead to use that money to see the world, to experience the kind of culture "one finds by immersing themselves in a place." She said she couldn't do that with only three weeks of vacation a year, so she had decided to quit her job, give up her apartment, and buy two round-the-world tickets.

“I don’t know what’s in my cards,” she said that day on the beach. “All I know is that I have the control to do what I want to with my life. I can’t say ‘Someday, I want to....’ I have learned and seen that ‘someday’ might not exist.”

Jen’s words turned out to be horribly prescient. In 2013, I learned on Facebook the devastating news that she had lost her fight against ovarian cancer. I think of all those wonderful experiences--whole lifetimes of experience--she must have packed into those two years of trekking across the globe. She had probably lived more in those two years than I had in my whole life. When I began to work on this thesis, I found a note Jen had scribbled on the back of a scrap of paper when Catherine and I met her for a drink back in Paihia after the tour. She had outlined a possible route through the South Island, which is where Catherine and I were headed next. She even wrote thoughtful little asides like “pick up fresh fruit at road stands” and “Lake Tekapo is stunning when the weather is nice.” Discovering her note in my Lonely Planet guide 13 years later was like finding an artifact from the dead. It was a reminder to be grateful for the people who cross your path--even if it’s just for a day. You never know the impact someone can have on your life or how you might impact theirs. Jen taught me that perhaps I was braver than I thought and that, though there are many ways to walk through this world, you first have to go.

Courage

When I look back through old diary entries from my early to mid 20s I see a troubling pattern--I see a girl who was plagued by self-doubt and indecisiveness. I realize now that many of the things I had done before deciding to go back to school to become a teacher were things that I had sort of just fallen into rather than actively or passionately pursued. It was like I just expected things to fall into place or work out. I see, too, a dreamer--someone torn between pursuing passions she could barely admit to herself like writing or film and more conventional and attainable realities. In my angst, I wrote things like *The world has become so big and yet so close I sometimes don't know how to find my way. There are so many possibilities, so many places to see and wander--so many lives to be lived--but I have only one life. I don't want to breathe life into one dream, only to let others slumber.* I get the keen sense of someone who both longed to and was afraid of connecting with the world. Certain words come to mind like lonely, lost, unsure, afraid.

How, then, do I come to terms with these fears both inherited and learned? How can I overcome these roadblocks to better answer the question: should I stay or should I go?

To varying degrees, like my grandmother and mother before me, I feel like I have always struggled with self-doubt, aversion to risk, and a pessimistic, glass half-full outlook. Like an expertly-cut gem, there are many facets to my fear and indecision, resulting mostly in paralysis. If you think about life like a series of roads or paths laid out before you, choosing one necessarily leaves the others unexplored. Like the speaker who stands in Robert Frost's yellow wood "knowing how way leads on to way" and doubting "if I should ever come back," (72) I am so afraid that by choosing one path, it will forever close the others. I am aware of the irony: not

choosing a path, of course, bars them all. Indecision or passivity is its own sort of negation. How, then, do we reconcile all the things we want within the reality of our lives and circumstances? How do we balance our hopes and dreams against our fears and insecurities?

At one point during my teacher training, I read a book called *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* by Parker J. Palmer. In it, he discusses the idea that we cannot live in fear. We can *have* fears, but we cannot *be* our fears. We must choose a different place from the landscape within ourselves--love, hope, curiosity--and teach from there. But I think his philosophy can also apply to how we live and not just how we teach. It ties into my own realization that fear isn't something one can necessarily get rid of or live without. Fear is just as much a part of life as love, hope, or courage. Fear, in the right doses, can even be a good thing. I'm certain our distant human ancestors found fear to be quite useful--it can help keep you alive or stop you from doing reckless, dangerous things. I think Palmer's point is that we cannot let fear overwhelm us until that is all we are. There are many emotions and factors that govern the decisions we make, and I love Palmer's belief that there are other emotions to call upon other than fear.

With the decision to student teach in New Zealand thirteen years ago, I began to realize that if I wanted to make something of myself I had to seek out opportunities for growth instead of waiting for something to fall in my lap. I had to cultivate the experiences that would help make me a better teacher and person. When training to be a teacher you learn all about Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development"--the theory that in order for learners to grow they must be sufficiently challenged but not so much so that they become frustrated and give up. It is basically the difference between what students can do by themselves and what they can do with the help of others, such as teachers. Life is like that, too. We all have

our own zone of proximal development. Some people are able to leap, dive, and cannonball into deep waters; some of us must first dip in a toe and test the waters--some of us, like myself, need a life preserver! The point is not how or when, but that eventually we all must swim.

When I look back at my life--at my decision to be a student teacher in New Zealand or study abroad in Sweden or learn how to teach Shakespeare through performance at the Globe Theater in London or change jobs after 11 years or even persevere with writing this thesis--I am reminded of all the times I faced my fears and that doubting inner voice. Of all the times I have stepped off the ledge into the unknown and trusted that I would somehow find my footing. I have experienced the joy and life-affirming, confidence-building power of doing things I think I cannot do even if not all the experiences have worked out like I had hoped or led to the place I want to be.

I think I finally realize that fear is something that will always be with me. It is my natural default setting. It is my first reaction when faced with new situations and change. There is no way to outrun it, hide from it, hop continents in the hope that it's the one thing that won't follow me. Nothing is guaranteed in this life, nothing is certain. Of the myriad paths laid out before us, we can walk only one, never fully realizing how way leads on to way except from the luxury of looking back. In that sense, no decision is a wrong decision--they just lead to different places. Yes, we can look back as a way to inform our future; we can even retrace our steps if we feel lost, but we can never undo the steps we've already walked, nor unmake the decisions we've made. Like the ancients stringing together stars to create constellations of meaning in an indifferent world, I try to connect the dots in my own life, looking for purpose, meaning, a sense of direction. Try as I may, it is impossible to see every outcome, to predict what lies beyond each bend. There is one thing I now know for certain: I must go forward. I have spent too long

looking back and feel that for much of the last decade I have been terrified of stepping off the well-trodden path. Courage, I realized, is not the absence of fear; it is the ability to act despite the fear. It is the willingness to look fear in the face and tell it to fuck off. It is the capacity to be more than our fears. In New Zealand, when I boogie boarded down that monster sand dune near Ninety Mile Beach and repelled down a 40-foot cliff at school camp and taught Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to a classroom full of teenagers, I proved to myself that I could overcome my fears.

New Zealand was a proving ground. It was the furthest from home I have ever travelled; it is also the closest I've ever come to calling somewhere else on this large, beautiful planet home. I fell in love with the people, the jaw-dropping vistas, and the laid-back lifestyle that encourages a work-life balance. It gave me the strength to know that I could strike out on my own and be okay. It taught me that I did have the skills and courage to be a teacher, that I could plan engaging, creative lessons and forge relationships with my students and become part of a new community. Two years ago, I took another step: getting a job at a new school.

At the beginning of this thesis I asked the question: should I stay or should I go? I think I have always known the answer to that question--I was just too afraid to face it. Perhaps, like Bilbo Baggins tells Frodo in J.R.R. Tolkien's epic fantasy *Lord of the Rings*, I once again need to take that first step out my door--even if I don't know where I might be swept off to, or how it will all end. I need to remind myself that it is better to take that first step than never go at all.

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