

# *Changing Gears*



*Janet Kuypers*

SCARS PUBLICATIONS AND DESIGN  
PENNY DREADFUL PRESS  
CHICAGO/INTERCOURSE

*Janet Kuypers*



*journals from traveling the United States*

# First Letters

## The Florida Letters

The following letters were electronic letters sent to a group of family and friends during the month after Janet Kuypers left her job, where she spent some time with her parents in Naples, Florida.

November 6, 1997

11:45 a.m. Eastern Standard Time

I'm at the airport in Columbus now; I'm sitting on the floor because there are so many people trying to get on this plane. My flight from Chicago to Columbus was late, which is a good thing, because I overslept anyway. I remember shutting the alarm off at six a.m., but instead of thinking that the radio was some sort of signal that I had to get up and catch a flight I apparently mistook it for some sort of cruel monster disturbing my precious slumber, so I shut it off and went right to bed. I woke up at 7:20, which was when I planned to be at Midway airport. My flight left in less than an hour, and I had to get up, get dressed, get my luggage together, wake up my roommate, and take the Kennedy expressway downtown during the beginning of rush hour to the Stevenson expressway, and still get my suitcase on the same flight.

But I made it. I felt like Elaine on the show "Seinfeld" when she was trying to get rid of her irritating long-distance boyfriend who came to visit and she accidentally overslept. I was frantically running, I think I hyperventilated the entire car ride. I couldn't even have driven fast, due to all the rush-hour traffic.

But I made it.

My flight was late due to problems with one of the navigational radios (that's comforting) as well as a problem at their hub in Indianapolis. So our arrival time in Columbus changed to 10:41 a.m., just one minute after my connecting flight to Fort Myers was supposed to take off.

Of course.

But luckily the Indianapolis hub problem affected Columbus, too, so now I have at least an hour to kill before I have to worry about getting on the next flight.

My chest feels funny from all the tension all morning.

Okay, Janet, deep breath. Inhale. Exhale.

Okay, that's not really working.

There's another guy here at this terminal using a lap top computer. I think it's a Macintosh. That makes me happy. I'd like to think that someone else out there is buying a Macintosh, other than me. Gives me hope that the company might be around long enough to fulfill any warranty problems I might have.

You know, it's interesting to see how strangers react to me when I'm sitting here working on a computer. If I bring my computer into a relatively empty bar, my computer becomes a conversation piece, and instantly I have friends who want to see the computer working there. But because I'm not in a business suit people look at me here in the airport in Columbus Ohio and think something is wrong. Or else they try to sit behind me and read what I'm writing.

Hey, stop reading this. (Not you, the person behind me. Hoped they could see that. Don't they have a newspaper or something?)

Had a lovely time last night, for the most part. I got to Joy Blue and apparently the open mike was becoming one big dedication to me (which of course, I can't complain about, but I can't help but be a little embarrassed, I mean, I got less attention on my birthday, so this was really cool). People read poems either in my honor or written for me and it was very touching.

Except for Rick's poem, where he used my name.

"Janet, now that she just quit her job, was complaining to me that she had no money, so I suggested she engage in the oldest trade known to man, that she sells her mind and her soul in her writing, how much worse is it if she sells her body? So she thought she'd try it, but I asked her to come by to my place the next day so I'd know she was okay. And she came over the next morning and she seemed fine, so I asked her, 'How much money did you make?' She went through her pockets and told me she made four dollars and ten cents. 'Four dollars and ten cents? Who gave you ten cents?' And she said, 'Everyone.'"

As crass as it is, I can't help but like that joke.

Lisa Hemminger wrote me a poem, which I really think is touching, and she handed her only copy to me.

After that we went to a bar known as Jub Jub Club. I stopped drinking at that point. I need to save some money, you know.

And I got home around two in the morning, I think.

Hey, maybe that's why I didn't want to get up.

I'm an ace that way with deduction.

It's overcast in Ohio. I think the plane is going to be another half hour late. I'm starting to get agitated, sitting here on the floor. There's a row of wheelchairs lined up at this gate, not at any other gate, just at this one. I heard someone asking their travel companion why there were all there, and I wanted to lean over and tell them, "Hey, we're going to Fort Myers. The Retirement Capital of the World." Thought I should-

n't overstep my bounds of being a rude Chicago stranger observing the proper amount of distance between me and everyone else, however, so I restrained myself.

A family just sat down on the floor next to me. Now I get to listen to them all bicker and whine. Three children.

The son sitting next to me, probably around seven years old, said to his brothers and sisters that mom originally wanted to name him Jake, but his dad changed it at the last minute. Then he asked his mom, "Was Dad drunk?"

I thought that was pretty entertaining. The sisters laughed.

Oh, the plane is here. Now only another twenty minutes before I get on board, and probably another half hour after that before we take off. You'd think these airline people would get into a routine and be able to speed this up a bit.

November 7, 1998

8:58 p.m.

Hi. It's me. Got in to Naples, Florida last night, and I must admit, it's nice here. I needed this. Last night I went for a bike ride, and then I went for a jog/walk at night. There were stars in the sky. I mean, I could actually see stars, unlike Chicago, where the perpetually cloudy winter night sky has a yellow-orange haze over it from the city lights, and besides, it's too cold to spend time looking up, making you also the perfect target for muggers. The city gears you to trudge through life, you almost want to look unhappy when you walk down the street so you fit in with everyone else.

Not so here.

It's muggy here; I'm hoping it will do something good for my sinuses. I feel like I can take care of myself now. I feel like I have the time to take a walk, or ride a bike, or stretch out, or eat well, or read more, or sleep.

So last night I went to bed here - it's a bed like a hospital bed, one with controls so you can sit up, so I propped myself up and read. I asked my mom why they had a bed like this. Mom told me that it was for sale at a park rummage sale. That's my mother, always getting something on sale. It's strange, being in a bed that you can maneuver. Oh, and there's a massage function, which just kind of shakes the bed for a while. I'm not used to my beds "doing" things.

So I woke up this morning, walked again, watched the men in the park (including dad) play tennis, then I swam and laid out and read Pettus' novel (I thought it would take me longer than two and a half hours; glad I brought a few more books). But of course, I overdid it a little in the sun and now my face is pink - It's not bad, though.

I was walking last night and I was saying hello to all the other people going for walks. I was smiling, literally smiling, while I was walking by myself down the street.

In other words, I feel really happy. And it's so good to feel that way again. Not have to worry about fighting for my job or arguing with people or even feeling like I have commitments, things I just have to do. All the engagements I have right now, other than an occasional dinner with my parents, are the plans I make for myself. They're thing I want to do.

It's wonderful.

When I went for a walk last night I stopped by the pond in the back and I sat down between two bushes and I looked up at the sky. Since it's approaching a winter sky, the constellation Orion was in the sky. I saw Cassiopeia, too, the same constellations I looked at when I was a child in love with astronomy and the sciences. And it made me so happy to be alive, just to see those constellations in the sky, to know that science is still there, that the world goes around and around. That my world made sense to me because there was science. And I know that probably sounds bizarre, but I loved it. I love the fact that I believe in things that I can prove and that there is a way to prove things. It gives the world clarity.

And believe it or not, I thought all of that in an instant when I looked up at the sky last night.

November 13, 1997

7:44 p.m.

I've been here just about a week now. Oddly enough, I'm not bored. So far, I've read two novels, some non-fiction, and some articles about AIDS drugs. I decided I'd like to attempt to write a novel, and I've been working out the plot structure. Today's job is to come up with a chapter-by-chapter outline. Then all I'll need before I start is names for my characters.

I haven't even been to the mall yet. I figure that if I'm trying save my money, I shouldn't tempt myself, right? All I've bought is two solid-color one-piece swimsuits; I have suits, but they're all old and I'm really in need of something new. Either way, they were on sale - the two suits cost me \$3.24...

It's strange that my life is now all about buying swimsuits on sale, but you know, I needed this rest. This is my chance to write, too, and I'm less interested in writing poetry and more interested in writing a story, which hasn't happened for at least a year.

# Introduction

## Driving To Champaign

We took a weekend trip to Champaign, Illinois, before this road trip.

I'm in the car now, and Eugene is driving, and we're going to Champaign. We stopped by Taco John's for some burritos and potato oles, and now while Eugene is driving he's also adding hot sauce to his burrito and eating and he's steering with his knees and we're on the highway doing 75 miles per hour and it's got to be relatively unsafe to be in this car, I'm sure, so if I die in this car, I better write something down with some meaning.

So: if this is the last thing I ever write, what should it be?

Oh, they're playing Depeche Mode on the radio, and it's always nicer to hear a song you like on the radio instead of playing it on a tape or something, it's like a present when you hear it on the radio, even the quality of the radio sounds better than a cassette, and you want to hear the whole song and cherish it because if you skip past it, like you would to the next song on a tape, you won't have the chance to go back and hear it again. This is your chance to hear it; you've got nothing else. But now I'm typing through the song, and not really enjoying it anyway.

They said on the radio that they were going to play Depeche Mode, but apparently Eugene didn't hear that, and so I said I wanted to hear Depeche Mode and he said that they wouldn't play it. And when the radio did play it within five minutes of my asking Eugene was stunned. "They never play this!"

You know, I've done that to him a lot, and he never catches on.

Oh, wait, that wouldn't be the last thing I wanted to say if I was going to die in this car. I forgot that's what I was writing about. This is most definitely not what I would want my last words to be. I don't know what my last words would be, though. Live every day like it is your last. Try to smile more. Try to think more. Value the people who choose to spend their time with you. Take a chance. Go different places. Don't have regrets.

Now Eugene wants to hear my Depeche Mode tape and I can't find it in the car. I've checked the space between the seats, I've checked the glove compartment, and he still won't let it go. He keeps saying that the tape can't have just disappeared, that it has to be here somewhere, that this really perplexes him.

Now he's reaching around and under his seat behind him, and the car is not staying in the lane. In fact, he just grabbed some tapes to re-read the case to see if I just missed it, if I'm blind and can't recognize my own tapes, and while he was at it he almost ran us into another car on the highway and I had to yell at him to make him look at the road again. Now he's flipping through the stations, you know, because he can't just listen to something, being as much of an antsy, impatient person as myself, so he's scanning through the stations, and of all songs to stop on, he has to stop on "Once, Twice, Three Times a Lady." So maybe I do want to die in this car.

And all I keep thinking is that we're supposed to be meeting Sara and Scott at Garcia's pizza in Champaign, even though we just stopped for Taco John's, because Eugene just had to stop for tacos, and now we're running late.

Okay, Now Eugene found another equally crappy song to play, I think it's Eddie Money or something, and really, I think he's doing this intentionally to drive me crazy. Okay, he's clapping along now, like it's the seventh grade cheerleader tryouts, and I now want to take the steering wheel from right out of his hands and run us right off the side of the road.

Oh, right, so I'm supposed to be writing what my last words would be, if I actually did die in this car. But it's hard to do that when Eugene does that hacking sound that he does, I mean, has this man ever heard of a tissue.

Okay, if I died. I suppose I'd tell people to not dwell on those silly little details that will always get you down. You know, those details will always be there, there will always



be something that can potentially bring you down, and you can always find something to pick on. But the thing is, you should just let go of those things, that's why they call them details anyway, so don't let them bother you. Just try to love life a little more.

You know, I've gone through a lot of crap in my life. I had beers with a friend tonight before I got on the road to Champaign,



you see, that's why Eugene is driving and I'm sitting here typing about it. And as I said, I was having beers with a friend earlier, and we each got our own pitcher of beer, she got limes to add to her Miller Lite, and when the pitchers came, before we poured our first glasses, I told her we should toast and drink right out of the pitcher, I mean, why not, right? Well, I went out drinking with her because she was down, because it's her wedding anniversary today. She's not down about missing her husband that she left just a month ago, you see, she's down because the concept of a wedding - her wedding - is now destroyed to her. She thought this marriage was going to be good, and what she went through was so bad that she had to pack up her things and leave. And I told her that I had a bad anniversary, too, and it makes me feel bad every year, and that you just have to go through it. That it's okay to dwell on it today if you have to. But I also thought that she should keep in mind that she has 364 other days a year to revel in the fact that she now has control of her life and her happiness. That when she was in a bad situation she took her life into her own hands, and now she's free. That she should know that if something doesn't kill her it will make her stronger and that she can say she's a stronger woman for going through this and she has learned something from this. She likes herself now, and she wouldn't be who she was if it wasn't for what she went through.

You can decide to be a victim or you can decide to learn from life, make the most of it, and be happy. So love life a little more. Make yourself the best that you can be, and never look back.

Okay, Eugene changed the station when they said they were going to be playing Phil Collins next. Maybe things aren't so bad.



# Chapter 1

## starting the trip

I guess I should get some of the basics out of the way. My name is Janet. (It's the name on the cover.) I recently quit my job, decided I was too fed up with the corporate world, and since I had saved my money, I would take a year off and travel. The plan comes in two phases: Part One is the U.S. leg of the tour, where I'm driving a central states route from my home in Chicago through to California and through the south to Florida before I head back home. Part Two is the European trip, starting right after I get back from my insanely long drive.

My roommate Eugene is going with me on the trip through the United States. I thought it would be safer to have someone with me; I hate to think that I couldn't defend myself, but at the same time, I probably couldn't repair my car, either. Safety in numbers, I suppose.

I've taken a few road trips before with Eugene. I never seriously thought about taking road trips before meeting him - I had been accustomed to flying when going on vacation. Since I had my own car, Eugene argued, there's nothing to stop you from going out of town for a weekend.

So we'd go on trips together. Once we drove to Western Illinois so that we could visit the Mississippi River right at the border of Iowa and Missouri. We collected geodes from the river's edges and investigated the damage from the year's flooding. We've driven to New York, To Omaha, to Boulder, to New Orleans and to many cities in between.

This is new for me though. I've packed everything I think I might need for the next three or four months into my car. Since Eugene has a seasonal job, he was able to go with me on the first half of the trip; he plans to fly back to Chicago by March first.

I visited my family before leaving. It's strange to see family and friends and say to them, "Well, I guess I'll see you in three or four months."

I don't think I'm going to miss anything in Chicago while I'm gone, though. I'm beginning to wonder if it's time for me to leave Chicago for some place else. I don't have a job or a husband to hold me here. And I really can't stand the weather - no one should live in a place where it gets below zero, much less ten and twenty degrees below.

Chicago in the summer, though, is a great town. There are street fairs every weekend, festivals everywhere, there's a lake to enjoy and lots of social opportunities. It really is a fun place to be in the summer - three or four months a year.

As long as you have air conditioning.

I don't really care to know the scientific explanation for it, but I don't understand how a place that can be so painfully cold one month can be a sweltering heat box the next month. I don't know how it has happened, but Chicago has lost spring and autumn.

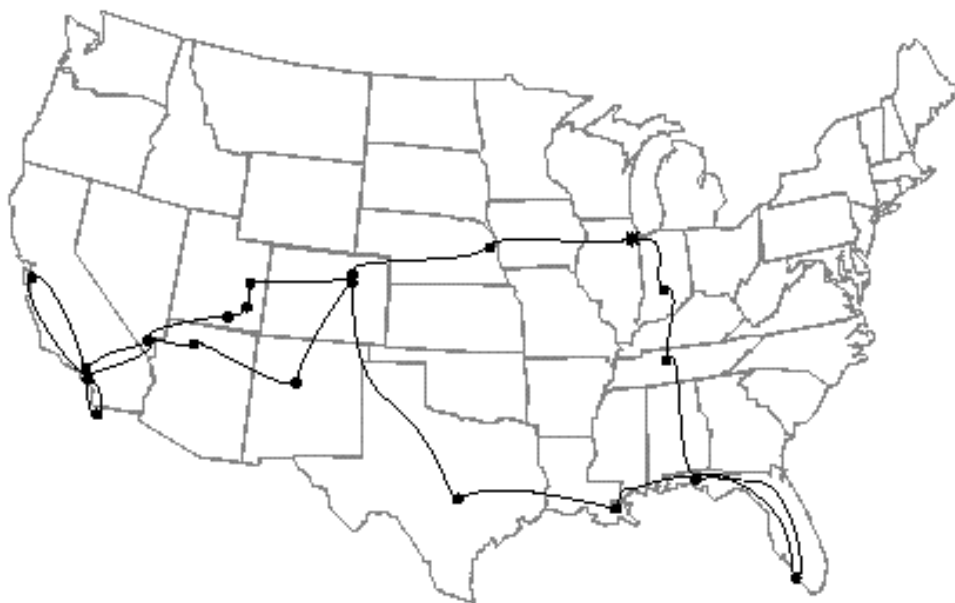
So I'm trying to escape the brutally cold winter in Chicago by traveling around the country. However, in order to get to California and other warm states, I first have to pass through states like Nebraska, which is currently twenty degrees colder than Chicago right now.

Ugh.

I have friends at most of the cities I'm going to. For the few places I don't have a place to stay in, we brought camping equipment.

I wonder if being in a car and on the road with Eugene for a few months will make me want to kill him.

It will be hard to tell; I usually want to kill him for one reason or another.



# Chapter 2

## Illinois

January 9, 1998

12:23 p.m. Central Standard Time

This morning we left Chicago. I wanted to kill Eugene this morning. This feeling of mine, however, is a relatively common occurrence. I had to work to wake him up and he hadn't even packed. I said I wanted to leave by 9:30 in the morning, but because he still had to go to the bank and pick up food at the pet store for the cat, we didn't get on the road until nearly noon.

He decided to bring his skis, in case he gets the opportunity to fall down a mountain while we're in Colorado. He figures that since Michael Kennedy and Sonny Bono did it, it would be a cool way to die. Each ski is wedged around the driver's seat, making it painful to get in and out of the driver's seat.

I'm already complaining.

I have to learn not to do that. I pick on Eugene all the time, and whether or not I think he deserves it, I should stop it. Besides, the trip will be a lot more pleasant if we can get along more.

I have a theory about radio stations in rural areas. Every time I have been on a road trip I've heard R.E.O. Speedwagon songs with an alarming frequency. I've vowed to see how long it takes on this trip to encounter one.

While we were in Illinois we managed to hear the Eagles, so we started belting out the lyrics as loudly as we could:

“So put me on a highway,  
and show me a sign,  
take it to the limit one more time.”

I'm sure I'm not the only person in the universe who has belted out a tune with the

radio while in the car. It's better than singing in the shower; this way, as long as you have your windows rolled up, you know that no one can hear you. The car is like your own personal recording studio, complete with soft walls to absorb the echo.

Usually on our road trips Eugene does most of the driving, and we usually drive at night. Since it was daytime this time, I offered to drive and drove through Illinois. My body must have an internal clock that breaks down my normal body functioning after driving a car for four hours. I don't know what it is, but I'll be ready to pass out after four hours of driving.

We passed Ronald Reagan's hometown; there were signs for it on the side of the highway. Eugene said he had been there and that it wasn't interesting at all.

So we passed it.

We decided to keep a log of what we spent our money on to try to save money. Eugene has been worrying that he can't afford the trip. I told him he could think of it as a contest, to see who could spend less money.

Then again, I prepared food for the trip, and he didn't. He'll probably be stopping at every Taco John's he can find.

I don't know what it is with Eugene and Taco John's fast food. He loves it like it was his mother's home cooking. He worked at a Taco John's restaurant while he was in college, and every time we're on a road trip and we get near a Taco John's he has to stop, since there are no Taco John's in Chicago.

I mean, yes, the food is fine, but it's a bean burrito. His passion for this food borders on an obsession.

Eugene was almost sleeping when we approached the bridge over the Mississippi river to get to Iowa. I woke him for it. I thought he'd like to look at the river; I knew I wanted to look at the bridge.

He asked why I liked the bridge. I told him I thought it was an amazing thing that we could design something to take us over this huge river.

As we approached the end of the bridge, I saw the sign welcoming us into Iowa.

# Chapter 3

## Iowa

January 9, 1998

1:45 p.m.

I asked Eugene to take over the driving as we got into Iowa City, about a half hour into the state from the east. I know from experience that driving through Iowa is almost as bad as driving through Ohio - it seems like the state just goes on forever. As soon as Eugene took over the wheel, though, he took over the radio, which made me realize that driving wasn't so bad after all.

He managed to find an R.E.O. Speedwagon song, "Keep On Loving You," as he fumbled through the stations past Iowa City, proving my theory about rural stations and bad music. It was only four hours into our trip. I think that's a new record. Then, after hearing our ceremonial R.E.O. Speedwagon song and singing along, which seemed fitting for our road trip: "It's time to take this ship into the shore, and throw away the oars forever..."

...it was on to the bad eighties songs. Brian Adams and Bruce Springstein were bad then; why would someone play their songs now, when we should have learned from our mistakes?

Then again, people are once again wearing platform shoes and bell-bottoms and listening to disco music. History does repeat itself.

As soon as Eugene gained control of the car, he hunted down and found a Taco John's. It was nice to stretch my legs again, so I know I was jumping around and acting goofy in the restaurant while I was ordering my bean burrito and my potato olés. Eugene mentioned to the guy behind the counter that there were no Taco John's in Chicago, so the guy started talking to me about what we were doing.

"Are you moving to Iowa?"

"No, we're just traveling around the country. We left this morning."

"That had to be the strangest thing that guy heard today."

Then he proceeded to tell me that he had a cousin in a northern suburb of Chicago, and spent the next three minutes trying to remember the name of the suburb. I'm sure that out of the over eight million people that live in the greater Chicago area, I'll be bound to know this guy's cousin.

"You went to the University of Illinois? Did you know John? He was an advertising major."

No, I didn't. Trust me.

So then this guy that worked at Taco John's said he had been to Chicago two or three times, so I told him that it's a fun city. We realized then there was nothing left to say, and he went back behind the counter and continued cutting the onions for the tacos.

Eugene spoke up while we were on the road. "Hey, we're driving toward the sun. The sun is setting." Then he paused before saying, "I wonder how fast you would have to drive to keep up with the setting sun... Maybe twelve thousand miles per hour?" I really try not to think about how his brain works.

"If you were traveling in a concord jet, how many times could you make it around the earth, without having to refuel before the sun would set on you? If you started at sunrise and traveled west, on a supersonic jet, like the Concord, how long would it take before the sun got too far on the other side?" He paused. "That's a very interesting question. If I had lots of money, maybe I'd try it." He keeps saying things like this, and doesn't act surprised that I don't comment. "Talk about killer jet lag, though," he then said.

I don't even have to say a word; he'll have the whole conversation himself.

We passed the Herbert Hoover Presidential Museum outside of Iowa City. I thought that if it was free it might not be a bad idea to go to it. Eugene didn't want to. He said he didn't like Herbert Hoover.

"What would they have in the Herbert Hoover Museum?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe some of his dresses."

Instead of merge signs onto the expressways, they use yield signs in Iowa. I can feel the culture shock already.



# Chapter 4

## Nebraska



January 12, 1998

9:57 p.m.

When we were a mile from the Iowa Nebraska border we drove over a hill and suddenly there was a valley. Now, this might not seem like much to you, but to someone who grew up and lives in Chicago, the concept of hills is amazing. Don't even discuss mountains with me.

Got into Nebraska and my most excellent friend Doug was there at his apartment waiting for us. Doug is the type of friend that you can be separated from for years and when you get back together you're instantly laughing and doing the same stupid things you always did with each other, like it was only seconds that had passed since you had last seen each other.

Doug is the kind of guy that everyone knows. I met him during my first year of college; since then we were great college drinking buddies. This was the type of man who managed a double major (pre-med and Russian) while being involved in Air Force ROTC, a fraternity - all while holding down usually two part-time jobs and still keeping up an active social life. And he was always happy. Or at least when he was mad it was a fun mad to watch and then you could laugh at him being mad and then he'd begrudgingly smile at you and then he'd be happy again.

Does that make any sense?

Doug is they type of guy that took you out for your birthday and bought you a series of different mixed drinks, just to watch the show. Doug is the type of guy that could mooch a slice of pizza off of any girl getting a pizza delivered in the dormitories in college when he worked as a guard. Doug is the type of guy that whenever you say his name to anyone who knows him, their eyes light up, as if you're talking about their best friend.

When I told people about my travel plans, and told people that the first stop on the trip was to Omaha, everyone asked me, "But why?"

Doug was my answer.

So for me, especially since I had seen the booming metropolis known as Omaha before, this was more of a social visit.

Doug told us tonight while we were at dinner that people from Omaha refer to their town as "The Big O." I don't know if he was joking with me or not, but when I think of "The Big O," I think of something entirely different.

We managed to find Doug's apartment without directions: we were going from memory. "Janet, what expressway do we take next?"

"I think it's something like 275 or something. It's got a two in front of it."

"Wait, Janet, that sign says 370 to Bellevue."

"Oh, that's it! Quick, get off here!"

"Well, how far do we go from here?"

"Um, I don't know. We pass 'Chandler,' I think."

"When we get off we turn right?"

"Yeah, we pass 25th street, and to 31st street, I think."

"This is 36th street."

"This is it, it's 36th, and not 31st. It's right by the McDonald's."

"Wait, which apartment is he in?"

"It doesn't have his name on the buzzer?"

"No."

"It's either 13 or 17." I stared at the panel of nameless buzzers and guessed it was 17, pressing the button ever so briefly, in case I was wrong. Doug let me in.

When we got into the apartment, the last thing we wanted to was unpack. I thought it was cold in Chicago: the weather reports recorded the temperature at around zero. So after sitting in Doug's apartment for a few minutes, we pulled out our suitcases from the trunk of my car, which took the better of five minutes, considering the amount of crap we decided to take with us.

"Don't forget the blankets!"

"Where's your pillow?"

"It's in the bag with my sleeping bag."

We decided to leave everything else in the car.

"Wait, what about the food in the coolers?"

"Well, it's going to stay cold outside; it's not like they'll go bad."

That appeased me until I asked the next question:

"Wait, there's cans of soda in there. Won't they explode?"

Eugene really didn't want to go back out to the car.

"Since they're in the cases, they won't get too cold."

This once again appeased me. Then I thought about it again.

"Wait. There's a bottle of champagne in one of the coolers."

Eugene shook his head and put his shoes back on.

Doug took us around the next morning, when Eugene finally woke up. Eugene slept

in as much as possible. I'd wake him up, he'd roll over and go back to sleep. I'd wake him again. The process would repeat itself until he had slept at least two hours more than me, which was hours more than Doug did.

I swear, he's going to sleep through his life.

We went out to dinner Friday night. Okay, so my theory that I wasn't going to spend a lot of money on food has already failed. Well, I still have a lot of soup and cous cous in the cooler. Oh, and bread and cheese.

Saturday Doug took us around the warehouse district of Omaha, which is right near downtown. There are huge gorgeous warehouses along this one strip, and now most of them are being converted into lofts. Every time Eugene sees them, he talks about wanting to live in them. Any time Eugene sees any warehouse, he talks about wanting to buy it and live in it.

So we walked around and shopped, or should I say browsed, through this part of town. This is my favorite part of town, because it has style, dare I say a touch of culture. (I tried to explain that to Chicagoans when I got back from my first trip to Omaha, but no one believed me.) There are retro shops, cool bars and restaurants, art stores, a store of Russian knick-knacks, new age stores and even a wine bar. (Hell, there's only one wine bar in Chicago that I know of.) There's also a grotto in the basement of one building - a stone alcove with three fountains of sculpted bronze heads on 6 foot tall stone pedestals spitting into the small pond on the ground with a small concrete bench on the side. The grotto was one of the coolest parts of town, and every time I go back to town I make a point of visiting the grotto. The first time I saw it I decided I wanted a grotto in my home.

Well, at least a fountain.

So we went to visit it this time, and there was a locked gate blocking the entrance to the grotto, so we could only look at the spitting statues through the bars. The host of the restaurant across the hall from the grotto told us that vandals kept stealing the heads, so they had to lock the grotto off for safe keeping.

I thought that was kind of pathetic.

And all I can think is that some high school kids in Omaha are using the grotto fountainheads as a big bong or something.

Doug had to work on projects for a class he's taking (he's going for his masters) so we tried to do things so he could have some time for himself. However, every time Eugene and I got out of the apartment without Doug, Eugene had to stop at the local Taco John's.

Ugh. That man should not be allowed to eat so many beans.

Well, I suppose no one should. But I digress.

So while we've been here we've done our share of shopping, and we hit the jackpot at thrift stores. Eugene bought an old metal thermos (it looks pretty cool) and a beer can light with a bulb on the top that flickers like a candle (trust me, it's cooler than any description I could give it). I broke down and bought a small punch bowl from the 1970s - it's a nice plain-glass bowl with lots of little cups and matching hooks - perfect for parties. But first I have to get home and have parties...

Oh, wait, I also bought a wig. I don't know why I buy them, I don't know why I

like wigs, but damnit, I do, and I found this most excellent new one. Currently I have one of my mother's old blonde wigs, as well as a black pageboy wig I used for an Uma Thurman Pulp Fiction costume one Halloween. But this one, this one is a short salt and pepper wig. It's crazy looking.

I don't know what I'm going to do with it. But now I can say it's mine.

January 13, 1998

9:15 a.m.

Eugene is still sleeping. Doug went to work. We went out last night, and we were all laughing and giggling so much you'd think that we were either small children without any supervision.

We had a good time. Eugene decided to inform us that he wanted human cloning to go forward so that they could make a clone of him one day, but with no brain. I didn't ask why, I only immediately said sarcastically, "Oh, that's a bit redundant."

Doug burst into hysterics and Eugene continued. We concluded that he didn't want the other body so that he could have organ transplants whenever he needed them as he got older, but so that he could take his brain out of his old, decrepit body when he was eighty and place it in the young, brainless clone body, so that he could live forever.

Doug was frightened by the concept of creating a brainless human being. I thought Americans had been doing that for a while by merely procreating, but once again I digress.

Then I suggested that Eugene's primary concern should not be with fighting aging and death tooth and nail, but facing his fear of aging and death. I don't think he liked that idea.

So... What else have we done in Omaha? Well, we went to this little dive bar called O'Bannon's, that had Super Ms. Pac Man, which made me happy, we watched televised Bulls games, which made Eugene happy, and drank \$5 pitchers of Killians, which would make any Chicagoan happy. We've gone to the movies (by the way, don't go to see "Bean," even if you like the British show it's based on, trust me), done a little shopping, and, well, were just social.

January 13, 1998

7:29 p.m.

I'm at our new hangout, O'Bannon's. I played "Ms. Pac Man." While I was playing the machine went on the fritz and I had to get the bartender to come over and unplug it and plug it in again. And as a 27-year-old, it seems kind of strange to have to go the bartender and say, "Yes, hello, I was playing a game of 'Ms. Pac Man' over there, and your video game went on the fritz."

Especially when this is an Air Force base bar, and a bunch of middle-aged people hang out here, like the type of people you'd find at a bar off the expressway or something.

You know, it says "Super Ms. Pac Man" on the machine, but it doesn't seem any different from the regular, plain old "Ms. Pac Man." I like the fact that Ms. Pac Man isn't married to Mister Pac Man, and that she's not a Miss, either.

Eugene is watching the Bulls game and is trying to watch the Illinois/Purdue college basketball game on the screen on the other side of the room, and he's visibly upset

by the fact that he has to make a choice between one game or another.

He keeps telling me his predictions of the next few seconds of the game.

“Kukoc is going to shoot it.”

“Over the back!”

“Jordan does more of a fade thing.”

Then he cheers the team on and talks to the players.

“Go Michael... Go Michael...” or “Brick!”

“He fakes... He shakes... He bakes... He goes up... He shoots... He scores!”

“He pops... He drops... He scores!”

“Ka-ching!” (That one is when someone on the Bulls makes a shot.)

“Go Big D!”, or in another minute, “Oh, Jordan sucks. Trade him.”

Then he yells at the screen. “That was a good move, by that wirey Seattle boy.”

“D’oh! That sucks.” Then he exclaims, “My ass, he was on the base line.”

“Oh, fricken-fracken.” (*Friccken-fracken?*) Then “That sucks dick.”

Really, you’d think he’d repeat some of them.

“That was clean!” ... “Bad call.”

“Ugh - foul there? That’s not fair at all.” ... “Oh, that was so clean!” ... “There was no foul there...” (Okay, so he may have some derivatives of his exclamations.)

“He walked.” ... “Sloppy game.”

“How could you have missed that?”

(Does he think they can actually hear him?)

“That’s a nice turnover.”

“They’re getting spanked.” (Apparently, that means someone else is beating them. Badly.)

He called Scottie Pippen “Scottie Scottie Port-A-Pottie.”

And so I sit and continue to write.

He keeps looking over and trying to guess what I’m writing about.

You know, I like writing in bars. I figure everyone is looking at me funny because I brought a laptop computer into a bar and instead of drinking excessively and watching a game, I’m drinking excessively and writing instead.

I could make this a hangout of mine, if I were to stay here longer. It’s never too busy. The beer is cheap. And the bartender was more than willing to help me with my “Ms. Pac Man” problems.

I talked to Dave today, and he told me about the problems he was having with the company I used to work for. I feel bad for him. If he left that job, I’d celebrate with him, because he needs to be free of that place, the way that every person has managed to preserve an ounce of sanity while working there should be. I’d toast with him if he managed to quit, the way he did with me when I put in my two-week notice.

That was the best day of 1997 for me, I think, the day I put in my notice. While



I was telling my supervisor in my office that I was quitting, someone brought a flower delivery into my office, a bouquet of red roses to help me celebrate my quitting my job (that had to be strange for my supervisor, hearing me say I'm quitting as I'm getting celebratory flowers). Then I had champagne in the office with the rest of the department at 10:30 in the morning, and I got to tell everyone about how I was planning on traveling around the country. Then everyone took me out to lunch.

It was such a burden lifted from my shoulders.

It was strange on the last day of work to look around my office. All of the pictures I had put up were down and packed. All my plants were gone. Anything that had any personal value was removed. It didn't even look like my office anymore. It was so empty.

They put another desk in there, because they figured that they'd put two people in my office instead of hiring or promoting someone to do my work.

I'd like to think that it was because no one could fill my shoes, but I'm sure it's because my boss would not want to spend the money for another supervisor, that he would prefer to hire a bunch of under-paid people without enough experience as long as it could save him a few dollars.

But again, I digress.

Eugene just walked over to the other side of the bar so he could have a better view of the University of Illinois game. They're only in the second quarter of the Bulls game, but the Illinois game is closer to ending, so he's really torn between the two basketball games.

He just came back, said two sentences to me, and got up again to walk back over to the other screen.

He told me that he was in the bathroom when another man started talking to him. And I thought that was strange, I always heard from other men that men just don't talk to each other in the bathroom. That talking while you're holding your penis and pissing, to another man holding his penis and pissing, is just too awkward and men don't do it. Eugene explained to me that I was correct, and that he never instigated a bathroom conversation, but then men seem to talk to him while he's in the bathroom. I wonder what that means.

January 12, 1998

8:53 p.m.

Okay, I just finished watching Eugene play a video game called "Arkanoid," which seems like a version of Atari's "Breakout," the game where you knock a ball back and forth, much like Pong, into a brick wall until the bricks start to disappear.

And I felt funny for being an adult in a bar playing "Ms. Pac Man."

The Bulls game is in the third quarter. Dennis Rodman has colored hair that looks like a leopard print.

I wonder what happened to that boy when he was a child.

January 14, 1998

11:14 a.m.

Oh, sorry about that long-winded bar entry last night. How embarrassing.

Well, we're in the car now, driving west through the entire state of Nebraska. We left at seven in the morning, when Doug left for work. It was still dark out. I think Doug was relieved to have his apartment back to himself. We cleaned yesterday, hoping it would make up for us taking his living room space.

Eugene is driving now; he has been driving all through Nebraska, which he theorizes is worse to drive through than Iowa. I slept in the car. I needed sleep.

I woke up in time to see a sign on the side of the expressway for one of the original Pony Express Stations. We stopped by. It was a small shack with a bunch of plaques around it. The townspeople made a time capsule and placed it there as well, to be reopened in the year 2010.

Eugene just told me that the Pony Express only existed for two years, that after that the railroads were built and the Pony Express became obsolete. People were going out west for ten years before the Pony Express was developed, so people could not send any mail to California. Hmm. He's like a Trivial Pursuit game sometimes.

Then we saw a sign for the Sod House Museum, so we stopped by. It was closed; it was just a big barn with a big plow in the front yard. But I had to take a picture in the back of the fake buffalo being followed by the fake Indian on the fake horse. It was the strangest thing I have seen in Nebraska.

But we still have a good 150 miles of Nebraska left before Colorado.

I saw a sign for Buffalo Bill's Ranch. Eugene asked me if I wanted to go; I said if it wasn't far off the road, why not? He told me he hated Buffalo Bill. You know, because he slaughtered all the buffalo.

Did I mention we're vegetarians?

Then he proceeded to look through a map of Nebraska while muttering under his breath about how awful Buffalo Bill was.

Those are the times when I just leave him alone.

"Can you just imagine seeing tons of buffalo running along here? Bar-um, bar-um, bar-um.... (That's apparently the sound they would make charging.) Tens of thousands of them. That would be cool." I don't think he considers the fact that tens of thousands of buffalo charging along the expressway here might be a bit dangerous, but I don't dare suggest it to him.

January 14, 1998

11:43 a.m.

I just saw a llama.

We were driving along the expressway, and you know, there are tons of cows and feed lots and the like, and then I look over and something that looks like a camel is walking along the side of the expressway. I tried to see why on earth there was a llama on the side of the road at this little farm, but found no answers. There's an animal I didn't expect to see.

Another R.E.O. Speedwagon song came on. "Keep on Loving You." It reminded me of when I was little. While my sister was in college she was turning 21, so my friend and I made an cassette tape for her to listen to on her birthday. During the summer I

got relatives and friends of hers to wish her happy birthday on tape; otherwise the tape was filled with my friend Sheri and I (we were 10 and 12 at the time) singing songs badly and joking around.

One of the songs we sang was "Keep on Loving You." We sounded awful.

We're stopped in North Platte now. And the further west we go, the more country stations appear on the dial.

But at least "alternative" music isn't alternative anymore and there is usually at least one station on the dial that plays music I recognize and tolerate.

And yes, not only is R.E.O. Speedwagon heard everywhere, but so is the Eagles and Don Henley. My music theory is going to have to expand to the Eagles as well. I asked Eugene why he thought we heard so much music by the Eagles while we were on the road. His answer was that the Eagles were "a little bit country, a little bit rock and roll."

Ugh. Eugene just got gas, and of course he asked the gas station attendant if there was a Taco John's in the area. So we're on our way there now.

January 14, 1998

12:45 p.m.

Since we forgot to get the oil changed while we were in Omaha, we thought we'd stop here and do it before we got into Colorado. It gave us a chance to stretch our legs.

So I'm sitting here at an oil change station, and the guy asks us if we want the inside of the car cleaned out. And he can see that the back seat is so filled that we can't even see out the back window, so what exactly could he vacuum?

The guy taking care of my car keeps talking about where we should go skiing, since he saw the skis stuck around the driver's seat and asked us where we were going. Eugene grabbed the first Sports section of any newspaper he could find in the waiting room, and so here I sit.

What I don't understand about men is why they feel the need to read articles about a game they watched intently the night before.

Now three people from the oil change place asked about our trip, what we do for a living. I still feel strange telling people that I quit my job to travel.

"Oh. What did you do before then?"

"I designed magazines." That seems to be the easiest way to put it.

"Oh." Clearly the don't know what to make of that career choice. "Did you like it?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's good."

What else do you say?

January 14, 1998

1:32 p.m.

Well, we're on the road again. It's getting warmer the farther west we drive. Yesterday it was less than ten degrees, this morning in Omaha it was probably around 30. Now when we stop and stretch outside we don't even need our coat and all the snow is almost gone. I wonder what it will be like when we get into Colorado, where the next stop is Boulder.



# Chapter 5

## Colorado

### Part One, Boulder

January 14, 1998

2:32 p.m. Mountain Time

Got to get used to the time change. I drove into Colorado. I expected it to be instant mountains, but I was wrong. There were a few rolling hills.

I tried to stop at one exit and look for a state park that had signs for that exit, but I couldn't find it.

Stopped to switch so Eugene could drive into Boulder, since he knows the place we're staying at and how to get there. Of course he found a Taco John's at an exit and decided to get a burrito and an order of potato olés.

That's the second meal of the day he had at a Taco John's.

January 15, 1998

1:22 p.m.

Last night, after stopping at Paul's apartment, everyone went out - except me. I think I had car lag. I needed sleep. Within fifteen minutes of me being on the couch by myself I was passed out for the night.

Paul is a friend of Eugene's from high school. He has two roommates, and is living the college life. Unlike Doug, Paul's apartment is filled with hand-me-down furniture and beds crammed into small bedrooms with their desks and dressers and crates and basically all of their belongings.

I don't know how to describe Paul. When I first met him he seemed quiet, but now I know better. Paul will be the one, drunk or not, at a wedding reception doing some sort of crazy performance-art dance, flailing his arms and legs about, attracting more attention than the bride or groom could.

One of Paul's roommates has a turtle. It was originally named "Mertle" from the pre-



vious owner, you know, so as to rhyme with turtle and sound cute or something, but they changed it to “Wee Willie,” because of an episode of *The Simpsons* where grounds keeper Willie said something in his insanely thick Scottish accent to the effect of, “Somebody’s got to save the wee turtles!!”

The turtle is in this small aquarium and there are just a few rocks and a few inches of water and this huge lamp. What a life. I mean, that would be like living in an apartment about as large as an apartment living room, with three feet of water all along the floor, with a few rocks sticking up to avoid the water, and a scorching five foot wide lamp in the corner. Sounds like fun.

Last night when we were driving in the sun was right in my eyes, so it was hard to look at the scenery. Boulder is located pretty much at the base of mountains along the Rockies. Half the skyline is dominated by black mountains with snow trailing down the sides. This morning we went to the grocery store to get some food for our stay and when we walked out all you saw was a bunch of cars in the parking lot and then mountains. It was insane. I think I could get used to seeing a ridge of mountains out my front window every morning.

I noticed two things about the grocery store today, other than the fact that Eugene took an insanely long amount of time to decide what kind of frozen pizza and canned soup to purchase. I noticed that the express lanes were for “15 items or fewer,” and that the general population of Boulder probably understands the grammatical error of “15 items or less.” I also noticed that the woman at the register wasn’t fat, or undereducated, or even in a bad mood, which are the traits that bind all grocery store checkout clerks in Chicago.

Eugene commented that no one seems to be fat in Boulder. Everyone here is concerned with living a more healthy life. This morning Paul and one of his roommates went out of an hour run. Paul is trying to get his speed back; he wants to be able to run a half-mile in less than two minutes again. Makes me want to eat some potato chips and watch some television... but that’s just me.

Eugene has also noticed that people smoke here a lot less, and that all bars on Boulder have to have a non-smoking section, or else are an entirely non-smoking bar. I asked Paul once how people like the non-smoking sections; Paul told me that there are generally only a few people in the non-smoking sections of bars, and then everyone pretty much crams into the smoking rooms. So much for being healthy.

January 15, 1998

4:14 p.m.

Just got back from hanging out in Boulder.

You know, I never go to those stores that look all yuppie-esque and nature-oriented, you know, stores like “American Eagle” or “Northern Expectations,” or even stores like “The Gap” or “Eddie Bauer” because clothes like hiking boots and flannel shirts and down vests are entirely unnecessary in Chicago, and in my opinion just look plain silly. And they’re expensive to boot.

Everyone dresses like that here. I mean everyone. And I guess it makes sense here,

I mean, to climb the mountains in the winter snow you need hiking boots, and driving up the mountains would be a lot better in a good four by four, but I mean, it is spooky, walking around and seeing just so many yuppies dressed like they just came from The Gap. It's kind of freaky. Another example of culture shock, I suppose.

I think I'm going to have to go out and get myself a pair of those hiking boots. I have nothing to walk around in that provides any traction or ankle support whatsoever. All the shoes I own are completely wrong for walking along mountain trails in the snow. And I guess if I want to hang out in the National Forests and hang out in mountains, I better get myself a pair.

The mountains here are just beautiful. In between all the pine and spruce trees are traces of white untouched snow. There was a brook with a lot of small bridges along at the base of a few of the mountains. The rocks were huge and there were a few people climbing them.

January 16, 1998

9:22 a.m.

Eugene is sleeping again. The roommates are up and about, so I feel in the way. Yesterday we shopped and got hiking boots. We went to a salsa party but missed the lessons, so we just watched a bunch of people dance. We then went to a bar with pool tables and played pool for a few hours. I was actually able to beat Eugene once, and usually he beats me mercilessly.

January 17, 1998

10:08 a.m.

Went hiking in the mountains yesterday afternoon. It was absolutely beautiful. Now I understand why people wear hiking boots. I've never had a pair of shoes actually provide me with good traction before. Every time I go outside in the snow I usually have to hold on to someone's arm and walk like a duck in case I slip. But yesterday I walked icy trails at mountainsides without pause.

I should have bought these a while ago. In order to take pictures, we kept climbing out onto rocks that were right at the edge of the mountain side - you know, to get a good view of the drop-off and show how high up we really were. And okay, maybe Eugene is used to climbing around on rocks because he was the type to play outside when he was little, but I grew up indoors, playing Barbie, and I have to admit, it was pretty freaky for me. I get this phobia of heights - not the kind where I just hate being up high, but where I hate being right at an unprotected edge and a slight mistake could kill me.

But then after a while I thought, "You know, I can walk on those rocks." I briefly thought of my friend Joe, who I'll be visiting in Pasadena within a month. Last year we hiked up a mountain and hung out near a metal power line tower, and Joe climbed up the large metal structure and started walking out along one of the girders, like it was a balance beam only three feet from the ground. If he fell from that thin metal beam he would have fallen for quite a ways. I don't know if he would have been able to survive a fall.

I told him about my fears. He said, "Walking on this line is just like walking on a

tile seam on your kitchen floor. You are capable of doing it. You mind id just telling you that you can't." I thought that was an amazing statement, but at the same time, I didn't climb up the tower.

But thinking of it while I was walking along the mountain edge, trying to precariously slide across rocks along the edge of the mountain, made me just stop, straighten myself, and walk. And I did just fine.

After hiking through the mountains in the Roosevelt National Forest we stopped home and read for a few hours; I have a few books I'd like to get through on this trip. Then we went to dinner at an Ethiopian restaurant. The first time I ever went to Boulder we went to this restaurant, and it was the first time I ever had Ethiopian food. Being a vegetarian, after a while you have to make the decision to try new foods, otherwise you'll get completely sick of pasta and rice and salads, and many ethnic dishes are vegetarian.

The restaurant has tiny little stools for seats, only about a foot and a half high. And your table is a bowl that one large platter fits into. Let me explain. Ethiopian food is served without utensils - there are rolls of thin bread that sort of resemble pancakes that you scoop up your food with. Your food, well, your food, for the most part, is a pile of mushy stuff. It's better than it sounds, though - if you have four people ordering four different foods, like mushrooms, sweet potatoes, lentil mush and split pea goo, it all comes on one big plats with piles of vegetables and salad and cottage cheese, and you share your entree with everyone. Everyone just sort of scoops up whatever food they feel like. And really, it is good.

So when our huge plate comes and they put it in our bowl-like table, the waiter scoops up a little food with a piece of bread to show us how to eat it, in case we haven't eaten Ethiopian food before. The waiter then held out the food to me and just to be silly I ate it right out of his hand.

I was careful not to bite his fingers.

So after dinner we went to a college town bar, one with cheap beer and loud music and lots of people. And we sat and had a beer, and then I remembered why I don't hang out in bars on the weekends anymore, and then we went home. Which brings me to this morning. I think we're going to go hiking again today, in the mountains in Roosevelt National Forest. By tonight we'll be in Denver, visiting my friend Tom.

## Part Two, Denver

January 17, 1998

10:20 a.m.

Mornings while Eugene is still sleeping is quickly becoming my writing time. It's becoming a ritual of sorts.

Well, at least there's one element of constancy in this trip.

I'm in Denver now, visiting with my friend Tom. We didn't end up hiking while

we were in Boulder; Eugene's friends wanted to shop a little at second-hand stores. We got some free books from a used bookstore.

I'm actually a bit disappointed. During my entire trip in Boulder not one word was mentioned about Jon Benet Ramsey.

But maybe that's for the best.

We drove into Denver last night. It's only about a half hour away from Boulder. Comparatively speaking, Denver is a city - it has high-rises made of steel and glass, a downtown you can see from the expressway, and surrounding good neighborhoods and bad neighborhoods. It hosts the Denver Broncos, which are going to the super bowl a week from today, so there's just a little hype here about it. Every time you turn on the radio, some Dee jay is qualifying someone for the chance to win a pair of tickets to the Super bowl.

Everyone I meet in this town, however, is not from Denver.

Tom is another friend of mine from college. For a very brief period during my college career I dated his best friend. It was the only occasion in my life where I met someone in a bar and ended up dating them. It happened like this: I was out with my roommate at the time, a 6' 5" man named Dan, and a tall female friend of mine named Terri (she was 6' tall). Seeing that I was 5' 11", it felt pretty good for once to be around people that were taller than me. And understandably, both Terri and I liked tall men. Well, as we walked in the bar I told Terri to check out the tallest man in the bar - a good-looking man, brown hair, brown eyes, glasses, talking with a friend. Later in the night we ended up sitting at the table next to theirs, and I started talking to them. The tall guy, Tom, later became my friend. I can't really describe Tom's personality, other than by saying that he's just so... nice. No, I mean that. He's genuine, and nice, and considerate. He never has a bad word to say. And every time I see Tom, his cheerful disposition always makes me smile.

I asked him once, "How do you do it?" He asked me what I meant.

I asked him how he always managed to be happy, and how he always managed to make everyone happy around him. And he just smiled.

Tom and Eugene and I went out to a Mongolian Barbecue restaurant last night - after having Ethiopian food the night before, I wasn't in the mood for a stand-by like pizza. After dinner Tom took us to a posh bar that serves martinis and wines and plays swing music. It was nice... Until Eugene had to start complaining. We were seated at a table right next to the bar, where their garbage can was, and periodically one of the bartenders would throw an empty glass bottle in the trash and it would make the loudest noise imaginable, right next to us. It was one thing to throw them in a large loud college bar late at night, but there were no more than twenty people in the bar, and it was a quiet, relaxing environment where throwing the bottles instead of placing them in the trash was not called for... at least that was Eugene's argument.

So he went up to the bar. Later he told us what he said, and it was something to the effect of "Excuse me, is it really necessary to throw the glass bottles into the trash? My friends and I are sitting right here, and it's quiet in here and we're having a conversation and when you throw the bottles into the trash it's very disturbing. It startled me."

Apparently one bartender said to him that he would stop throwing bottles into the

trash - until he left. Well, what we heard was another bartender say to him, in the tone a bully would use on a kid right before he stuck his head in the boy's locker room toilet and flushed, "Oh, it scared you?"

And then the first bartender put on his little bully voice and said, "Oh, no, it startled him." So Eugene just walked back to the table.

So after that the waitress didn't come back to the table and the last cosmopolitan I got tasted terrible, and of course I couldn't go up to the bar because we were ostracized by Eugene's little comment. I felt like I was in high school again.

We imagined that after we left they all grabbed a few bottles and relished throwing them into the trash as loudly as they could.

So after that Tom got a bunch of his friends together and we met up at a bar, and Eugene's friend Dave met us there and we just had ten people at a big table and we talked about dumb things like "South Park" and "The Simpsons" and the like.

That's when we discovered that everyone at the table was either from Illinois or Indiana. A lot of the people there were friends of Tom's that he met in Denver, not in the Midwest, but everyone was from the Midwest nonetheless. That's why I wonder if anyone is really from Denver, or if everyone just sort of moves here.

I think Tom's roommate is going snowboarding today. I don't know for sure. I wonder if Eugene is going to attempt to go skiing, since his skis have been crammed into my car for over a week now. There are some museums I'd like to go to while I'm here, but I think this afternoon will be dominated by the Bulls game on television, at least if Eugene has anything to say about it.

January 19, 1998

5:11 p.m.

Tom is the "bestest" host in the Universe. I mean it. (Did I just sat, "'bestest'?" Sorry...) Yesterday he told us to bundle up and he was taking us to the mountains for a hike. So we get in the car and stop at a tiny, tiny town right at the base of one of the mountains.

"What are we doing here?"

"Oh, there's a little bar up here I wanted to take you to. We can grab a beer."

It was Sunday afternoon, before four. I imagined a hole in the wall with three people drinking in the corner. When we got in, I looked around to see the place was packed and there was a six-person band playing live on stage. Everything was carved roughly from wood - the poles, the rails, and the ceiling beams - even the bar. We managed to find a little room at the bar and Tom, Eugene and I shared a pitcher of a local micro brew. People were dancing in the corner. Most people were wearing flannel and boots, some people wore leather. This was a true redneck, roadside bar. We decided to go to the mountains after that pitcher, but come back after it was dark. We drove in the mountains, saw some elks (apparently they only live in altitudes of about 8,000 feet), jumped in some snow banks, got lost, and found our way back to the Little Bear Western Saloon, where we shared two more pitchers. I ate some waffle fries on the upstairs floor of the bar while the second band played blues and Tom and Eugene challenged two locals to a

game of pool. Tom noticed that Eugene turned into a different animal when he played pool, that he instantly became focused and played very well. They won, and we left.

On the way home we sang eighties songs in the car with the radio: Safety Dance, Alive and Kicking, and yes, even Thriller. When we got home Tom went straight to his vinyl collection and pulled out the Carpenters, Men at Work, Christopher Cross and OMD. All in all, it was an interesting evening.

It was good to get the chance to go somewhere with some local flavor, to get a feel for what really living in this area is all about. And for once, the country music they were playing at the Little Bear didn't bother me (usually I run away in terror when I hear country music). A place like that, with a real neighborly feel, could really grow on you.

So today Eugene and I took off while Tom was at work and trekked over to Golden, Colorado, which is another small town close to the mountains. Golden is so named because it was a stopping point for people who needed to pick up last-minute supplies on their way to the gold rush. We found a Taco John's, of course, but at least it was my first since Nebraska. Sine we saw the Coors factory and there were signs pointing to the brewery tours, we figured we'd take a free tour. The entire place smelled like malt, and everything was slanted to how great the Coors Brewing Company was, of course. But at least afterward they gave us three beers and told everyone that they were welcome to come back any time, and ask for the short tour (which would take them straight to the free beer). So keep it in mind if you're ever in Golden - tell the people at Coors that you want the short tour.

When we headed out we noticed the signs pointing toward Buffalo Bill's grave, located at the top of one of the mountains, we decided that this would be a trek for another day, since it was getting late. Tonight we're going to give Tom a break from us and visit with Eugene's friend Dave, who also lives in Denver.

January 20, 1998

9:46 a.m.

Usually you meet friends through friends. Seldom do you just meet people out of the blue and you're just nice to each other and you end up feeling like good buddies by the end of the night. Well, at least in Chicago you don't.

That's one thing I've noticed in my travels, past and present: that people in the West are just plain old nice, that people are more friendly, that it's easy to start a conversation, that people will help you if you are in need. That's how I met my friend Aaron, whom is first on the list of California friends I'm visiting. That's how I met people in Tiajuana, college-age Americans living in San Diego, who later kept us up in their apartment and showed us the San Diego nightlife.

Well, it happened again.

Eugene and I went to his friend Dave's apartment. Dave's roommate Matt was there, and we went to a dance bar that had pool by about eight in the evening, when the pool tables were free and the music was quiet enough to be able to talk over.

Matt and Dave are friends of Eugene's from college. Dave is a quiet guy. He doesn't speak often, and when he does, he speaks quietly. But listen closely - because he's thought

about what he wants to say and you know it's going to be good. Eugene described Matt, on the other hand, as "flamboyantly reclusive." I still don't know what that means, but it somehow manages to suit him - although he's not particularly talkative or extroverted, he sounds like he's from "the Valley," like he's gossiping and very social.

They both smoke. And they both play pool. Hanging out with them was fun. After we left the dance bar we went to a cheesy hole-in-the-wall lounge called The PS Lounge and shot more pool. Then a woman around our age come up and placed quarters on the table; so I sat out and let the boys play a game with her. Her name was Christen, and we started talking. I was amazed at how much fun we were having. She said she was planning on going to Europe for a month and a half, like I was; that maybe we could meet up there so we were not both traveling alone. Christen, Matt and I started discussing a performance artist named Laurie Anderson, when another stranger playing pool came over upon hearing her name and started talking about how much he loved her too (you have to understand, not many people know who Laurie Anderson is, much less pay any attention to her, so to be talking to three other fans was pretty amazing). Christen bought me a shot of Goldschlager, some stranger named John bought a drink for everyone in the bar so he could make a toast to friends of his (we don't even know why he was making the toast - it seemed like a solemn occasion - did all the people he toasted to die?). We talked about school (Christen said she once called a professor a "fucking prick" in front of the class), we talked about roommates, we talked about traveling - we seemed to talk about everything.

So when that was said and done, we went to another bar. Lion's Lair, or something like that, that was the name of the bar. At that point I was trying to milk my beer so that I wouldn't get too drunk or spend too much money.

There Dave taught us what a meme was. In essence, there is a theory that ideas have lives - the way a virus does, and that an idea can spread from one host to another, therefore prolonging its life. This can refer to anything from a joke to a bit of trivia or blueprints for an invention. I guess Dave's meme spread to us tonight. Anyway, we talked about the strangest things, including Matt's (and Dave's, I think) love of the character Dana Scully on "The X Files," where Matt then proceeded to insist that I looked just like Dana Scully, despite my constant pleas to the contrary. Christen told us stories of past friends who lived in an "Acid Pad" (they were her words, not mine), and of a friend who would get so drunk on a specific type of liquor that once they told a friend of theirs, "Hang doughnuts from your ears, or I'll kick your ass."

The other person refused. And he got his ass kicked.

We learned that Christen was a bully in junior high (when someone came up to her and asked if they went to the same elementary school, Christen's response was, "Did I ever extort you for money to go to Butthole Surfer shows?"). And when we eventually got ready to leave, Christen told us that she was a bartender and that we can have free drinks at the bar she works at, and if we need a place to stay we can stay at her place here in Denver.

I remember that when we were saying good-bye, she was swearing that she'd e-mail me so we could stay in touch, and she kept telling me I was so smart and beautiful as



she was hugging me good-bye (she even insisted she was straight, but that she just wanted to let me know.) I'm not used to such an outpour of compliments. I had to keep telling her to stop.

So all in all it was a very fun evening. Maybe I'll get the chance to meet her at the bar she works at tonight. Maybe I'll stretch this Denver trip to be a little longer than I planned.

January 21, 1998

2:27 p.m.

Yesterday we went to the U.S. Mint. I know, I know, the things we're doing sound like things you'd do on a family trip during summer vacation when you're twelve, but I've never done these things before, and hell, there's a first time for everything. We watched them processing tons of metal, making pennies and quarters. Eugene bought a silver proof set of coins for his coin collection. We drove up the mountain side and visited Buffalo Bill's grave (just to say we did.) It's amazing to someone who is not used to mountains that the temperature at the base of a mountain can be nearly 50 degrees and at the top of the mountain be 20 or 30 degrees and very windy.

We went back to the Coors brewery (since we were there in Golden anyway, of course) and took the short tour and had a few beers, and then we headed back. On a whim I decided to color my hair red, but since my hair is dark brown the change is not that drastic. It should wash out in a month anyway.

We went out with Dave and Matt again last night, this time to the Boiler Room, where Christen was working. After playing pool and video trivia we headed to another bar, then to Dave's place to hang out. I got home very late.

Christen's roommate is out of town, so she invited us to stay in her apartment Thursday night, and we are going to stay through the weekend at Dave and Matt's (their new apartment has a Jacuzzi). Hopefully then Eugene will get the chance to go skiing or snowboarding before we leave. It only pushes our time line back three days, and since we had close to three weeks slated for California, we should be just fine.



January 23, 1998

1:36 p.m.

Went out with Tom and Jason for dinner. Stayed at Christen's last night. For the rest of the weekend I'll be staying at Dave and Matt's new apartment - the one with the Jacuzzi (these are important considerations). Visited the Capitol building, joined onto a tour group late, then figured out the tour group was a bunch of junior high Baptist school students. I think we've run out of tourist-like things to do. The next few days will probably just be social.

January 25, 1998

Super Bowl Sunday

12:26 p.m.

We're at Lion's Lair again, watching the Bulls game. It's right around noon and there are dollar drafts for Budweiser, and there are a bunch of old people in here spending their Social Security checks on liquor. Since the last time I've written we went to visit the Molly Brown house (she was a survivor of the Titanic), we played a lot of pool (not at the Molly Brown house, mind you), and we went to the Denver Art Museum. I spent the day there, after everyone left me. I read "The Fountainhead" while sitting on the second floor, by the architecture and modern graphics exhibit.

Most of the Denver Art Museum is filled with things like Native American Art, Ancient Asian Art, and the like. Now, please don't get me wrong, there is something to learn from visiting these exhibits, learning about how the patterns sewn into clothes of Indian dresses, but in my opinion most of the exhibits belonged in a history museum, and not in an art museum. It might sound callous of me, but I believe that although there are things that can be learned from these artifacts, the study of art should be about visions that propel us into the future, teaching us what our potential is, not about reveling in our past. But that's what I want art to be.

So I was reading "The Fountainhead" in the Art Museum, this is the second time I'm reading it, I read it about nine years ago for the first time. And the book is about an architect, one who defies convention and stresses that any building should be a result of the materials in the area, so that it is in harmony with its surroundings, but it should also be a tool for the people using the building - that it should most completely serve its function; that ornamentation is useless and covers up the function of a building. And although Ayn Rand (the author) never agreed to these comments on her book, many people say her book very closely reflects the life and vision of Frank Lloyd Wright. Eugene even told me in passing recently that one of the houses that they built in the novel closely resembles "Falling Water," a house Frank Lloyd Wright built in Pennsylvania. Well, while I was in the museum, reading my novel. I noticed a book of modern architecture on the coffee table in front of me. So I picked it up, hoping I could find a picture of "Falling Water." There was a three-inch square black and white photo of it in the spine of one of the pages. When I saw the angles of the house, on top of a pile of rocks with a waterfall below, I almost cried. It seems kind of funny, I suppose, that a small photo could almost move me to tears like that, but just by looking at the exterior of this house you could see that it was a result of the minds of the home owner and the architect, with the surrounding area in mind. It was functional. There was no ornamentation; it didn't need any. It was breathtaking, all without the need for carved wood trim or cornices or Greek columns.

That is the kind of house I want one day. I've been thinking about that lately - what kind of house I'd want to build. I couldn't settle for a cookie-cutter suburban house; I'd have to buy a bunch of acres of land in the middle of a forest near some mountains with a lake near by and build my dream house right in the middle of it. But then again, I need to get a job after I'm done traveling. So I guess I should worry about that first.

Dave has been a very gracious host. I'm glad I've had the chance to talk to him more and get to know him better. He's a funny man. He's also very quiet, and I always

seem to be fascinated with quiet men. They always seem to have more valuable things to say. Some men don't seem to know when to stop talking; then it gets to the point where you don't want to listen to a thing they have to say, because 95% of it is useless. But not so with Dave.

Tonight well go to be going to a Super Bowl party. Everyone here is so excited about the concept of the Denver Broncos winning the Super Bowl, but I really think the Green Bay Packers will win it pretty easily. Tomorrow we leave for camping in Southern Utah, seeing National Parks before Las Vegas.

Someone just came up to me from the bar and asked me if I was doing work. I told them yes; in a way I am; but it just seemed the easiest answer to give. They said, "In a bar? Well, at least you're doing your work."

I'm amazed at the amount of time I've spent here; I almost feel as if I have actually become acquainted with the place. Most time when you go on vacation you go for just a short enough time that you don't get comfortable with it. I like the fact that we've found places to hang out. I like the fact that we are getting to the point where we know where we're going in this town.

It makes you feel like you've really learned something about the town.

January 25, 1998

1:13 p.m.

*entry by Dave Adrian*

*It wasn't like that at all. She's missing certain critical bits of information, items that would shed an entirely new light on the situation. For example: lately people have been giving me free shots. Jaegermeister and liquid cocaine. And this changes things, you see. My pool game has improved drastically. I'm getting better at shaving. My cats ventured out into the new apartment this morning, discovered the fireplace, and were promptly covered in grey soot (Kaiser on his right side, Soze on her left). And my shower - you can't imagine the altered perceptions a hot, powerful shower can invoke. I've been dreaming about computer games lately. But Janet doesn't understand any of this. She doesn't care. She just taunts and teases, nips and bites and barbs and poisons, and I try and I try but it's just never good enough or clever enough or dignified enough, and I have to wonder... And usually, at that point, it's time for another game of 11-UP. I'm going now. Hmm. I'll miss them.*

January 25, 1998

1:32 p.m.

Oh, I think he's the one that's the tease.

Dave mentioning his cats reminds me of a trick Eugene learned with Dave's cats - one male, one female, both fixed. If Eugene constantly meowed for about two minutes, the male cat would try to jump the female cat. The female would fight back. It was cruel, but still an interesting show.

January 26, 1998

2:38 a.m.

Went to the basement of Dave's apartment building to play pool and there were a bunch of people there who were celebrating the Bronco's victory in the Super Bowl. They had a keg of beer there for less than ten people. So we went down there and drank their beer in the next room while they dominated the pool table, and then I realized that they were playing strip pool, and the next thing I knew there was this guy in his underwear in the next room playing pool, then he was stark naked. I really tried to avoid looking. No, really. I mean, why would I want to look? I felt very awkward being there, even though the man seemed very comfortable. Well, eventually a woman became topless, and all I could think was that she looked very uncomfortable. She was crossing her hands over her chest as the people I was with were sneaking glimpses.

Although I wasn't the only one to comment on her body language and the fact that she seemed uncomfortable, no one's behavior changed.

And I suppose it's one thing to play strip pool, or whatever the game might be, if you're in a group of people you feel entirely comfortable with, but it was suddenly apparent to me that this woman wasn't comfortable, and from that moment on every look she received seemed to be a violation.

So I asked if we could leave. Everyone agreed. We went to a bar to play pool, since we couldn't get access to the pool table in Dave's building. As we were walking out in the street, on our way to a bar, I saw a modern design furniture store. As I looked through the window at some of the beautifully crafted, simple, functional pieces on display, a part of me twinged at the thought that no one who will purchase these items will understand their beauty and functionality. It made me think that no one deserved to see these creations.

January 27, 1998

8:59 a.m.

Am awake before Eugene, even though I'm extremely tired. Today we leave Colorado and head to the National Parks in Southern Utah. Throughout this whole trip Matt, with Dave's agreement, has repeatedly told me I look like the woman from "The X Files."

People here have been extremely hospitable and kind to us. I'm surprised that I actually met people that I would like to keep in contact with. Maybe I'll try to get a little more sleep before I head out.

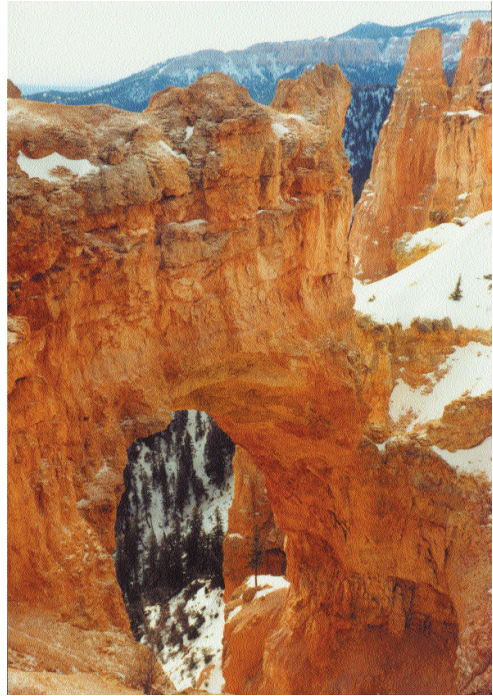
January 27, 1998

9:42 p.m.

On the road again... We drove through a tunnel that passed us through the Continental Divide (the ridge of mountains that defines the drainage of water, either to the Mississippi or to the Pacific basin). We passed through Vail, and for a while on the road there was a beautiful stretch of cutout rocks from the Colorado River. We visited Glenwood Canyon and drove through the White River National Forest. Periodically we would stop and take pictures and walk along the river. The mountains slowly cleared and we were approaching mesas and then plains again. Then I saw the sign up ahead for Utah.

# Chapter 6

## Utah



January 26  
10:00 p.m.

As soon as we crossed the sign welcoming us into Utah, I got so excited. I know it sounds retarded, but I've never been in Utah before, and I really get into visiting new states. I think this brings me up to 37 states now, but I'm pretty sure I'm not going to Idaho or the Dakotas any time soon, so I probably won't make it to all of the states for a while.

And then I remembered when I was little that I asked my mom if we could plan a vacation to Utah so that I might be able to visit the Osmonds.

God, I was so retarded.

A part of me has been wondering if Utah would be a good place to move to. I mean, I'm guessing property taxes are pretty low, and land is probably cheaper, so it might be easier for me to afford those 100 acres I want so that I can live in seclusion and avoid all the stupid people. Then again, the Mormons are here, so maybe I wouldn't be running away but running toward problems.

As we were driving it got dark, and we pulled off the interstate so we could take a good look at the stars. The view of the night sky in Colorado was beautiful, but near cities it was still hard to see a lot of stars. Today we went off the road, turned off the lights on the car, and when I saw the sky, I just couldn't help but laugh over and over again; it was so amazing to see so many stars. (You forget that I'm used to seeing the city-light-stained orange glow of the overcast Chicago night sky, complete with an occasional plane. And if you're lucky, you might see the glow of what would be the moon behind the thick layer of smog covering the entire city.) It was amazing. I might try to manually override my camera's shutter speed when we're camping and try to take a picture before we leave Utah.

But tonight camping is not a part of the plan. Since we got in so late, and since

camping would have cost \$13.00, we figured we could spend the extra \$10.00 to get a hotel room with a shower and bath and television with cable and phone and while we're at it, heat. So here we are staying at the Robbers Roost Budget Motel.

Eugene needed dinner, so we went a block away to a bar called Frank's Pizza. Drafts were \$1.00, a thick crust pizza (we have leftovers) was only \$5.50, and pool cost a quarter a game, instead of the usual 75¢. Frank's Pizza was still dirty from the Super Bowl party they had the night before. I noticed a sign over the bar that said, "Isn't it a lovely day? Just watch some bastard louse it up." Eugene asked Frank about the other signs in the bar, signs that said that people would be arrested who bring in open containers of liquor, and Frank told us that the "bastard Mormons" came in with liquor, as a sting, and put him out of business for ten days. And he also used a few more expletives.

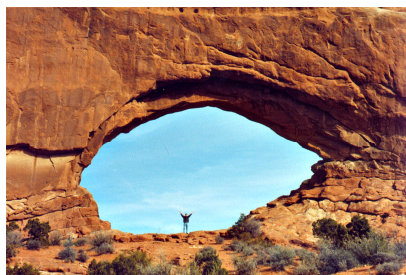
On the way out, we noticed that there was a Baptist church across the street from Frank's Pizza. Maybe I don't want to move to Utah after all.

So now Eugene is watching "Star Trek: The Next Generation," reading the Sports Section of the Denver Post he picked up this morning, and here I sit, writing. Tomorrow will be a long day.

Eugene just went in and came out of the bathroom, after cleaning his feet in the bathtub, and asked if a hot bath would make me feel better. He had the water running. Then he suggested I might like a candle, since we brought two in case of road emergencies for the car trip.

I'm impressed. I think that's the nicest thing he's done on this trip. I think it's the first time he thought to do something to make me feel better.

So, I think I'm going to take a bath. Maybe drink a half glass of the cheap red rose wine (Livingston Gallos all they way - \$3.99 a bottle and tastes just like soda) I brought with me when I'm done and I'll read after that, and go to bed.



Just got out of the bath. I feel much better.

There's an ad for Las Vegas from the Tourist Association on television, and I'm thinking as it's playing, I should see what's going on in that commercial, so I have ideas of what to do in a few days when I get there.

Then there was a clip on a television show about hair replacement technologies, including implanted cranial snaps. The system was a toupee with four snaps that attach to bases implanted surgically into your skull.

Eugene asked me if that was going too far for cosmetic purposes. I reminded him that face-lifts entail cutting the skin all along the forehead, then using a metal wedge to separate all the skin from the muscles in the forehead - all the way down to the eyebrows. You know, so doctors can then pull the skin up so the patient's forehead will look years younger.

That didn't seem to explain it to him.

Eugene opened the nightstand drawer and found not the Bible but the Book of Mormon. Fitting. I recalled an X Files episode about the usual government conspiracies

and asked Eugene to check the book to see if there was a bug in it, so the government could keep tabs on what everyone traveling is doing. Because you know, the Bible is the most trusted and unquestioned item in the hotel room. No one would think twice about it being there, and it could have a wire on it monitoring everything said in the room.

I told Eugene to check the spine, because that would be the easiest place to plant a bug. He actually checked, just for show.

Then I asked him to check the book for information about multiple wives. He checked the index for polygamy; it said:

*polygamy: see marriage.*

January 28, 1998

12:16 p.m.

This entry should be titled, "How I Got Naked In Arches National Park."

No, wait, that doesn't sound too good. Allow me to explain.

Yesterday was a very interesting day. In the morning we left our motel room and went first to Crystal Geysir, just outside of Green River, Utah. The geysir supposedly went off every 13-17 hours, but no one recorded when they went off in the past, so we had no way of knowing if it would go off while we were there. The geysir was located at the end of about four or five miles of dirt road, past where missile testing was done by our government. There was no one at the site, but it looked like there were remnants of campfires from people who patiently waited for the geysir to go off (if I lived here, I would probably do that one, just to see it). We listened to the water gurgle under the surface and found a bubbling puddle about 30 feet away from the geysir. Eventually we gave up on the geysir going off while we were there and left for Arches National Park.

We bought a yearlong pass to all the national parks, so that we could save money on entrance fees (Eugene wants to go to every park we can, and I want to go to the Everglades after he leaves anyway). There were red rock cliffs and sculptures everywhere. Rocks balanced on top of other rocks - 35-foot tall rocks, that is, weighing 3,500 tons, balanced on top of 120-foot rock poles. (One rock formation, in fact, looked just like a penis, which I had to photograph. We decided to call it "cock rock.") The main arches we hiked to were the North And South Arches and Turret Arch. These huge rock arches, usually formed by either bends in water streams that eroded the rock, or (more frequently) erosion from wind and rain, stood on tops of mountains and from the arch you had a great view of the valleys on each side of the mountain.

As we were hiking I found rocks that looked like quartz, and asked Eugene if he knew what they were. Most of the pieces we found were chert, and Eugene explained to me that it was a stone that Indians used for making arrowheads and the like, and that it was common in this part of the country. I found a few pieces and saved them.

It seems that when Eugene and I go on road trips we collect rocks as souvenirs, instead of purchasing cheesy little trinkets and the like.

Now, after collecting rocks from different places, when we get back we just have to remember where all the rocks exactly came from.

The last arch we decided to hike to was Delicate Arch, which was almost two miles

uphill. I was panting climbing the rocks, and Eugene was just trotting along like he was on one of those people movers you find in airport terminals. At one point I decided I wanted to rest and didn't care about the arch, so I told Eugene to go on without me. When I sat down and looked at the scene around me, I was amazed. For a good half hour I sat in the middle of this mountain range, near the top of a large, smooth bed of sandstone, and looked at the canyons, plant life and ridges around me. It was phenomenal. Then it occurred to me to stop moving and rustling around and listen to the sounds around me. There was absolutely nothing. During the entire time I sat there I heard a plane once and a bird once. No wind. No motion.

When you live in a city, that's something you're never used to. Living on a main street in Chicago, I hear semi trucks and souped up cars and people yelling at all hours of the night. And here it was perfectly silent.

So eventually Eugene came back and he told me that the remainder of the hike is worth the effort, the Delicate Arch is so beautiful that I just have to see it. Since he was willing to back, I walked up the rest of the hill and walked around a cliff edge and climbed a few rocks and got to the arch.

The top ridge we were standing on was in the shape of a giant U. We were on one end of the U, and Delicate Arch was on the other end. Eugene walked along the edge of the ridge and got to the arch for me to take a picture. Then he said that I should just sit up there for a bit, and really enjoy the view. He said he would leave me alone and walk to the other side of the ridge so I could have some space. I told him to guard for me, and holler if anyone was coming.

You had to walk around the side of the ridge in order to see the arch; that was the only way you could get to Delicate Arch. The U-shaped ridge with the arch and me was entirely secluded from any people. I knew Eugene was going to climb a smaller rock formation on the other side of the ridge and enjoy the view of the other side, so I knew he'd leave me alone. When I made sure Eugene was out of sight, for some reason I decided...

You know, if you didn't visit this area, you might think that what I did was strange. But at the time it made perfect sense.

I unlaced my hiking boots, and took off my socks. Then I walked over to a ledge where I'd have a good view, and I took off my clothes and sat on them. I just sat there, for a few minutes, naked, in the middle of this sandstone ridge and arch, and enjoyed the scenery.

It was quite exhilarating.

But after a while, 60 degrees becomes more than exhilarating - even with the sun shining on you - so I put my clothes back on and started walking very quietly toward where Eugene was. I wanted to make sure he hadn't walked around and inadvertently seen me.

When I got around the ridge Eugene was wearing his t-shirt and had his jacket in his hand, climbing down from the top of another small ridge. I told him what I did and he thought it was kind of funny. He was sitting on the ridge shirtless.

As I said, I don't know why it seemed to make sense to do it, but I guess I wasn't the only one that thought that, so I can't be completely crazy.

On our way out of the park we stopped at Sand Dune Arch, but by the time we got there it was beginning to get dark. We tried to take a picture, but I also decided to



collect a film canister's worth of sand, which in this park was a beautiful red-orange color. We went into Moab to get some water and a state map before going to camp at Canyonlands National Park, which was about eighty miles south of Arches National Park. We found a brewery/restaurant and had a small dinner (well, I had a small dinner, soup and fries, and Eugene had chili and a garden burger and onion rings). After dinner we drove in the dark to Canyonlands National Park.

Camping was free at this time of year in Canyonlands, and there was no attendant on duty when we arrived, so we drove straight to the campsite. There was only one other camper that we could see. In the dark we set up the tent and brought in our blankets and pillows and sleeping bags and set up for the night. When we finished setting up, we bundled up and walked out onto a rock near our tent to look at the stars.

There were no towns around us for at least forty miles, and there was not a single cloud in the sky. It was absolutely amazing. We could see the Milky Way very clearly, and in the winter sky we could easily spot Orion, Scorpio, the Pleiades Cluster, and the bottom half of the Big Dipper, dropping into the horizon. I'm not sure if I have ever seen that many stars in the night sky before.

Eugene and I were sitting on a white sandstone rock when he finally spoke.

"Looking up at these stars, doesn't it make you feel so insignificant?"

My eyes must have been saucers, looking up at the night sky with a grin I couldn't remove from my face. "Not at all. I could never think that."

"How could you not?" he asked. I told him that I can't look at my life as insignificant, that if I did I wouldn't want to excel in life and I wouldn't have any reason to continue. I told him that implied after the line "Doesn't it make you feel so insignificant?" was, "Doesn't it make you feel so worthless? It makes you wonder why you should bother." And I told him that I cannot function that way, that I have to look at life through my perspective, that this is my life.

I told him I looked at these stars and thought that this was science, this was something I could chart, learn from. I told him that the constancy of the stars in the sky reminded me of the constancy of the world around me. These were the same stars I looked at when I was a child. (Well, you know, unless a select few have disappeared from our vision during that time, but you get the point.) I told him that although in my opinion all aspects of science are beautiful (isn't it beautiful, for instance, that we can look at minute organisms through a microscope and see and learn from them?), that astronomy and the night sky seems so inherently beautiful, that the night sky was just so aesthetically pleasing. I told him that I loved the understanding we can gain about our world by studying other planets and stars and galaxies. I told him that I loved the fact that I was on one of those planets, and that I had this unique opportunity to actually look at and contemplate the night sky.

I don't know if he entirely understood what I meant.

Eugene then told me that he just saw a meteor. I remember when I was little, my sister Sandy would join me and my friend Sheri on our front yard, and we'd all sit on either yard chairs or a big old comforter stretched out on our front yard, and we'd wait for the annual meteor shower that occurred in the second week of August. Ever since I was a child

I have been fascinated with the stars, with astronomy. I had a telescope, I wrote articles as a child for children's astronomy magazines (I think that was my first venture in publishing), I read books on astronomy - my brother even named a star for me one year for Christmas through the International Star Registry. (Later, as an adult, it occurred to me that the International Star Registry is nothing more than a company, a private venture that decided to name the stars, at the mere price at the time of \$30 each, and log them in a book, which is housed in the Library of Congress, like most other books in print. These are not scientifically recognized names for these stars. Someone just decided to claim that they could name the stars something else. Talk about enterprising.)

I watched the sky and spotted a few meteors. For the most part, the meteors that night were falling between Orion and the Pleiades Cluster. I told Eugene that I remember seeing a fireball when I was little - an orange ball with flames shooting off from it - that was about as big as ten stars. I never knew if it was a very close meteor, or refuse from a satellite dish.

Eugene noticed that it's impossible to imagine three dimensions in space. Everything looks like it's on a flat plane - all the stars, meteors, even airplanes. It looks like a painting. It looks like a black sheet with a very dim light on the other side, and someone poked tiny, tiny holes all over the sheet.

Eventually we started getting cold, so Eugene went to the tent and I went to an out-of-the-way rock to pee (something I hate doing in the wilderness, speaking as a woman), and we got ready for sleep.

Tom loaned me his sleeping bag before we left Boulder, which was a good thing (by the way, thanks again, Tom), because the temperature was probably in the upper teens. I brought five or six blankets, which provided some padding on the ground, but you could still feel the cold seep up from below you. I was impressed at how warm the sleeping bag was. Eugene, however, was freezing. His sleeping bag zipper was apparently broken. He kept saying, "If my feet are frost-bitten in the morning, you're going to have to drive me to the hospital." But in the middle of the night, when Eugene's snoring woke me up, and then it occurred to me that I was freezing cold. I shivered and shook for I'd guess about an hour and a half, listening to Eugene snore, before I managed to get back to sleep again. The freezing cold and Eugene's snoring kept waking me up all night. By the morning my feet were ice cold.

Now, in my opinion, if I have to pay at any of the other national parks, I might as well pay the few extra dollars for heat in a hotel. Hell, you only live once, and I don't feel like risking my toes to frost bite again.

When we woke up this morning, Eugene told me I was snoring, too. (I don't believe him; but in fairness I thought I'd mention it.) we started packing up when I noticed that the birds wanted some of Eugene's peanuts. So I got a heel of bread out from the car and followed Eugene's lead, sticking my hand out with a crumb of bread on it. Although I can't tell you for sure, I think the birds were either nuthatches or finches. What I can tell you is that the bird felt perfectly comfortable flying onto our fingers and taking the food from the palms of our hands.

I continued feeding the birds until they seemed full, giggling each time a bird land-

ed on my hand and put their tiny claws onto my fingers. Then I helped Eugene finish packing up the car and we headed for sightseeing in Canyonlands National Park.

In my personal opinion, Arches National Park was much nicer, but the canyons and different colors of rocks in the formations were interesting. I also learned more about the plant life there, and saw many sage bushes and plants called "Mormon Tea," which is called that because the Mormons, when the first moved here, used the plants for making tea. I managed to get some of the leaves of each and am hoping I can use them for herbs and for teas when I get back home.

Which takes us to about now, where I'm sitting in the car and Eugene is driving and we're headed south. We're probably going to pass by the Monti-La Sal National Forest, then head on to Natural Bridges National Monument (you know, versus those man-made bridges - what point would there be in having a monument to a man-made bridge, right?), then to Glen Canyon for the rest of the day, camping there before Bryce Canyon and Zion National Park.

We're driving through Natural Bridges National Monument now. The hikes are difficult, but short, the view is quite interesting. I decided not to bother attempting to take photographs, because no two-dimensional picture can really do the scene justice. All the rocks are curved, from erosion, and there are no harsh sharp edges. The canyons drop deep and the natural rock bridges are framed by occasional bushes, patches of snow and multi-colored stones.

I've noticed that we can get only three stations in on the radio - and they're all country. For a while we were able to get in a station broadcast from an Arizona high school, but the accents on the student disc jockeys were so thick that we couldn't pay any attention to the schedule of high school basketball games and spring dances, we were just trying to figure out what the accent was. Eventually we gave up; soon after we lost the station.

January 28, 1998

7:06 p.m.

I'm sitting in a fast food restaurant called Stan's now. Took some pictures in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, but we decided to move on so we don't have to go as far tomorrow. Eugene is playing Ms. Pac Man in the back room, I think, or else he found another arcade game to play. I'm stuffed. I'm in a small town, one that's not even listed as having a population in the road atlas Eugene has. I'm impressed that they had garden burgers.

Eugene and I have pretty much agreed that tonight it seems colder than it did last night and if it's possible we should stay in another cheap hotel. Now the task is to find one. Another thing I haven't been able to find since I've been in the Utah Parks is a phone jack, which I need in order to check my e-mail. I usually check it daily, but now it has been two days, seven hours and forty-nine minutes since I've been able to get on the super highway.

I'm not sure that the nature lifestyle is entirely for me.

Really, I feel like I'm going through withdrawal. I know that 90% of my e-mail is junk mail, messages with subject headers like "I know you want me" or "Send bulk e-mail to 50,000+" or "Turn your washing machine into a money maker." Really, I don't know how they get my name on their lists.

Every once in a while I even get an e-mail with a subject header like, "Hot gay men want to talk to you!", and really, I don't know who they think I am, but I'm won't pay money for gay men to talk to me. And since it seems that all the good men are either married or gay, my problem isn't in finding gay men.

I just heard that my friend Dave (not the Dave in Denver, this is Dave in Chicago), who used to work at the same company I did, is no longer working there. I want to get a hold of him, but it was easier to talk to him when I knew where he was eight hours or more of the day. I wonder if he thinks I'm ignoring him. I'm not... I can't even write him e-mail, since I haven't even been able to get on line. I hope all is going well with him. He's been a good friend to me in recent months and I wish I could be there to help him celebrate being free of that hole, I mean, not having to work at that company anymore.

January 29, 1998

6:50 p.m.

Last night we decided to break down and get a hotel - Eugene swore that last night would be the last night we stayed in a hotel, because he couldn't afford it. We went to a Days Inn, which had a pool and a Jacuzzi. We were one of four rooms booked; by morning when we had our continental breakfast, we were the only people staying in the hotel.

I must have stayed in the poolroom for over two hours. Going back and forth between the pool and the hot tub felt fantastic. There were four different dials controlling jets in four different directions for the hot tub. It was great.

I have this thing for hot tubs.

This morning I got up before Eugene did and went to the hot tub again, then I managed to get the woman at the front desk of the hotel to let me use their main phone line so that I could check my e-mail.

She must have thought I was strange, obsessing over technology.

Keep in mind that most of the towns we pass through here in Utah are nestled in among National Parks and Forests. On the state map, over half of the towns listed do not have a registered population. Otherwise the towns have less than 500 people in them.

So after briefly checking my e-mail I went back into the hot tub.

You know, I had to get in any hot tub time while I still could.

Okay, we then drove to Glen Canyon National Park, which in my opinion wasn't as cool as Arches National Park.

So I hiked along, following Eugene through Glen Canyon, then letting him go ahead because I couldn't keep up with him. When we were finished we drove for a few hours south and west to Bryce Canyon National Park. We arrived there near sunset, and it was snowing. From what little amount of time we spent at Bryce Canyon, I could honestly say that it was breath taking. So we decided that we needed to stay in town for the night again and see Bryce Canyon tomorrow.

Since there was snow on the ground, Eugene suggested staying in a hotel.

I agreed to stay in a low-budget hotel this time, and we registered for our room at “Doug’s Place” in the adjoining grocery store. Also available were free copies of The Book of Mormon, in assorted languages.

So far I have The Book of Mormon in French, Chinese, Hebrew, Norwegian, German and Italian. I also got one from Denmark. I still need to get the Russian and Spanish ones.

Need to fill out my multi-lingual collection of The Book of Mormon.

So we got to the hotel room, and as we started getting out luggage out of the car, we noticed that there was an outdoor hot tub. And yes, it’s cold outside, but I’m going to have to do it. As I said, I have this thing for hot tubs.

Just got back from the hot tub. It was only about 94 degrees in the water, which is about eight degrees less than it should be (yes, I’m picky...). So, on Janet’s scales, here is how the hot tubs on this trip have so far rated:

Hot tub Number One: Dave Adrian’s apartment in Denver, Colorado: They need to clean it, re-tile the edges, ventilate it, remove half the chemicals and raise the temperature at least ten degrees. Other than charming company it is by far the loser. Get working on the renovations, Dave, for when I visit again.

Hot Tub Number Two: Days Inn in Torrey, Utah: So far the winner. Spacious tub with four dials controlling four types of jets. Well ventilated; nice windows. Perfect temperature. Next to a large pool to cool off. Four stars.

Hot Tub Number Three: Doug’s Place Hotel in Tropic, Utah: One of those plastic all-in-one tubs, standing above ground. It had comfortable seats, and three jets. Colder than it should be, but it was kind of cool that it was outside. So far, it’s in second place, but I get the feeling that the hot tub at Scott’s house in Pasadena will beat it. It’s possible that even the hot tub attached to the pool at Joe’s house could beat it, as long as he’s willing to turn on the heat for the hot tub for us before we arrive.

Last year, when I visited California, I stayed at Joe’s house for a day. Once he was cleaning the pool outside when I dipped my foot into the adjoining hot tub, which was ice cold. I asked him why it was cold. He replied, “It’s winter.”

I didn’t mention to him that it was eighty degrees out. - it seemed obvious. But you know, it’s winter.

I beat Eugene to the shower when we got back from the hot tub, and now he’s saying that he’s not going to take a shower. Because, you know, he was in the hot tub, why would he need to take a shower?

He seems to have this mortal fear of any type of water, unless it’s a hot tub (mmm, that nice chemical and chlorine smell).

Well, we have traveled 500 miles since our first city in Utah, Green River. (I asked Eugene if the phosphate Green River came from here. He didn’t think it did.) Tomorrow we’ll go through Bryce Canyon, then pass through Zion National Park, and hopefully take make the trip to the Grand Canyon by tomorrow night, where it will hopefully be warm enough to camp.

My friend Jocelyn told me that she thought Bryce Canyon was better looking than

the Grand Canyon. And from what I've seen today, it might be.

January 30, 1998

4:56 p.m.

Am leaving Utah. Eugene is driving. Got a Portuguese version of the Book of Mormon, and an English one, just in case I actually wanted to read it.

Oh, who am I kidding?

This morning we drove to Bryce Canyon for a better look. The elevation was over 9,000 feet at parts, so even though it was Southern Utah it was not very warm. The snow was all over the peaks of the ridges and we had to bundle up in order to check out the sites.

Yes, I do have to admit that Bryce Canyon is much better than most of the other national parks. From what I've seen, Arches and Bryce are the best bets.

After hiking around a bit, we drove south and west to Zion National Park. Eugene seemed to enjoy it, but for me it was less than spectacular - call me picky and antsy and impatient, but I've seen so many different kinds of mountains and canyons and peaks and ridges and valleys that every time we walked another trail, all I could do was sarcastically say, "wow, another rock."

But you know, I'm the person who was having withdrawal symptoms when I didn't have access to my e-mail.

So then we found out that the road connecting Utah to the north rim of the Grand Canyon was closed for the winter, so we decided that we may try to hit the Grand Canyon on our way back from Los Angeles, when we are south of the Grand Canyon in Arizona.

So we drove about twenty miles and Eugene wanted to stop for food, so we settled for a Taco Bell instead of a Taco John's. And when we got out of the car we noticed it had to be twenty-five degrees warmer than it was in Zion National Park. Eugene immediately spotted the small palm tree and other plants that were tropical, and we felt like we had driven for three hours instead of twenty minutes.

So we ate, and Eugene took over the driving. Well, all in all, Utah was somewhat interesting - definitely different from most every other state I have ever visited. There were lots of different mountain ridges and national parks, and no big towns. Well, at least not in the southern half, and we didn't go up toward Salt Lake City - even though that's where the Osmonds live.

Not sure if I'd want to live here, I haven't made up my mind yet. As a single person looking for an apartment to rent, Utah would definitely not be the place.

I have to admit, it's beautiful here, though.

I'm trying to get Eugene excited in seeing Las Vegas - he's never been there before. He thinks it's tacky, and it is. But it's an experience everyone has to go through at least once in their life times, and if Eugene wanted to spend so much time in the parks and forests, well, he better be prepared for some tackiness.

We have to pass through twenty-seven miles of Arizona before we reach Nevada.

# Chapter 7

## Arizona (27 Miles)

January 30, 1998

5:07 p.m.

The elevation is now 2,000 feet, instead of 9,000. That could be one reason why it's warmer. The speed limit is 75 miles per hour, the same as it was in Utah. All of interstate 15 is cut out from in between huge rocks, which I would classify as mountains, but then again, a big hill is like a mountain to me, so I'm not one to judge. The land we're driving through is publicly owned, which means ranchers could still come in and claim it, I suppose.

We're driving at just after five in the afternoon, and heading west, so we've got this atrocious glare from the setting sun. Actually, we've driven at this time of day when we've arrived at most every city we've driven to so far. I can't wait until we head east again, so at least we will have an easier time seeing when we drive.

Eugene is talking about how he could live out here, in a flat area and have a good view of the mountains. We're starting to drive away from them now. I had to explain to Eugene that Las Vegas is in the middle of a vast flat stretch, and on the horizons is where you see the mountains.

I think he's starting to get the idea.

We're playing a tape of eighties music while we're on the road. Ring My Bell just ended. Eugene is going over 95 miles per hour.

I just asked him how fast his fastest speed was.

He told me it was 99 miles per hour.

Great.

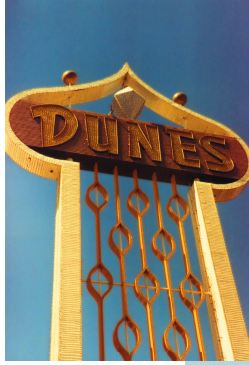
Just looked up, and saw a sign welcoming me into Nevada. Guess I'll have to write more about Arizona when we stay there after Los Angeles.





# Chapter 8

## Nevada



January 30, 1998

4:16 p.m. Pacific Time

Another time change. This means more time to get drunk.

I've been to Las Vegas twice. The first time was when I was eighteen, with my sister Sandy and my parents. It was a month and a half before I went to college, and the last thing I wanted to do was go to a place where I was restricted from all forms of recreation, since you had to be 21 to drink or gamble.

My parents were on a gambling junket that gave them tickets to a Mickey Gilley concert.

And as I said, I hate country music.

I remember once my mom trying to find something for me to do, giving me a quarter and telling me to play a slot machine. I don't gamble. Never mind I was under age. She said it wasn't a big deal, so I sat down at a slot machine, and with the efficiency of a SWAT team two men came up to me and asked to see my identification, all after I started to lift my hand to the slot machine, but before I could get the quarter in.

I told him my I.D. was in my hotel room. I got up and walked away.

At one point my parents gave both my sister and myself \$20 to spend at Circus Circus, which is a casino with an amusement park in the middle of it, with the same kind of cheesy ring-toss or dart-throwing booths you'd find at the carnivals that came to your suburbs and set up in the back parking lot of the local mall. I didn't want to play, and suggested to Sandy we split the money and tell the parents we spent it all.

She didn't go for it.

So we went to a booth where you threw darts at a wall of balloons three feet away, and for every balloon you hit you got this stuffed animal that rivals a beanie baby in size. With an entire wall of balloons, I figured that as long as you actually aimed the dart at the wall, you'd win something.

So I played.

Sandy's darts sort of arched in the air; the darts moved more like a badminton birdie than a line drive to home plate, and when they hit the balloon they actually bounced off them and fell to the floor.

I split with her the stuffed animals I got.

The second time I went to Las Vegas was for a trade show my old company was running. I worked on registration, and I was one of three photographers. The turn out for the trade show was so pathetic that my additional job at the convention center was to apologize to all the people who spent good money to come to such a terrible show.

Both times I stayed at the Las Vegas Hilton. Not the Flamingo Hilton, not the tacky one, not the unique one, but the this-is-a-building-that-could-be-anywhere Hilton. At least there was a huge y-shaped pool on the third floor, with an equally impressive hot tub outside. If I had to rate that hot tub against the others I've been in on this trip so far, it would either come in first or second, because:

1. it was huge - probably twelve to fifteen feet wide,
2. it was outside, and with a gentle breeze the weather was almost perfect,
3. it was surrounded by Greek columns, which served no function but looked kind of cool,
4. the water was warm without being so hot that you had to periodically get out to cool off, and
5. the water jets came from the armrests in the middle of the tub, so that your back didn't get shot with high-powered water sprays when you leaned back.

All in all, it was a worthwhile hot tub. If you're in Vegas, I highly recommend it.

I remember the main conflict during my work trip to Las Vegas was that a few of the men on the trip were worried about spending time with female co-workers, because their wives might get the wrong idea.

Well, one of the men that was worried was the type that would cheat on his wife, so maybe he did have something to worry about. But the other guy was a born-again Christian, the most trustworthy guy, and his wife had no reason to think that he would make any moves on any co-worker, or that he would accept the advances of any co-worker.

But they were worried anyway, so on the first night, when you usually go out with all of your co-workers for dinner, they suggested that they shouldn't eat with the women.

Ah, children.

On the second night they apologized for their behavior and invited a few of us lowly females to join them for dinner. The born-again Christian's brother joined us from Los Angeles for the night.

That's where the problems started.

I got along well with the brother. He was a nice guy. We ended up talking for the entire night, and he never made it back to his hotel. (We really were just talking.) But the born-again was very displeased. He kept giving me the cold shoulder.

I wanted to go up to him and tell him that I didn't defile his brother, but I figured that wouldn't be a good move, either.

That was a strange trip. I also saw an old friend of mine that wanted to sleep with me, so I had to repeatedly reject his advances.

And every night I only got between two and three hours of sleep.

I don't imagine that this trip will be anything like either one of those trips. Eugene and I don't gamble, and we don't even have a hotel. We might stay at a campground about ten miles out of the city.

But for now, we're still driving through vast stretches of nothingness, on our way to Las Vegas.

I think Las Vegas is the only thing in the southern half of this state.

The mountains, or mesas, or whatever they are along the side of the expressway, look more like big mounds of dirt than sculpted ridges.

Those national parks made me spoiled.

Las Vegas is a crazy place. Everything is extremely well lit. None of the casinos have windows. They don't want you to know what time of day it is, because if you realize that it's dawn you might stop gambling. They have so much power from the Hoover Dam and they have to use so many lights and so much air conditioning that they actually cool off the air on the sidewalk right outside the front doors to the hotels and casinos. Cigarette girls walk around in short skirts. Prime rib and lobster dinners cost less than six dollars.

It's sort of like going to another planet.

As I said, it's tacky, but it's something you have to experience.

January 31, 1998

9:42 a.m.

We drove along the strip when we got into town and the number of lights and signs on the main strip shocked Eugene. There was more than I remembered, too. We drove for a while and decided to park at the parking garage at Caesar's Palace. We didn't know where we were going to sleep, and we thought that we might just try to stay up through the night, instead of attempting to find a campground in the middle of the night with no good map.

So I showed him Caesar's Palace first. It is attached to a shopping center, and the halls of the shopping center are decorated to look like you were walking outside. The ceiling is domed and painted sky blue with clouds; the facades of the stores are made to look like the outside of a building (done in the classic Greek style, of course, with lots of marble and tons of columns). There were hallways with immense salt-water aquariums, and at the end of one hallway there was a mechanical show of ancient figures depicting the fall of Atlantis, complete with water fountains, flames and moving mechanical people.

We walked through the casino and I noticed the cocktail waitresses (there were no roaming waiters) were all wearing skimpy white toga-style dresses with gold trim.

Ah, women's lib.

So without gambling at casino number one, we headed on. Walking outside you could see the rows of statues and marble Greek columns trimmed in gold along the

entranceway and sidewalk.

The Mirage was the next casino heading north; we walked toward it.

Every time I saw the sign for the Mirage, the Beastie Boys' song "Sabotage" went through my head, and I had to quote the lyrics out loud:

"Oh my God, It's a Mirage, I'm telling y'all, it's sabotage."

The entire front yard of the Mirage (Oh my God, it's a Mirage) consists of waterfalls. I don't know how much water they use, but for an entire block all you see are stairs of stones and all you hear is the rushing of water.

We stepped on to the people mover to enter the Mirage (Oh my God, it's a Mirage) to see more pools of water. Eugene was amazed that people threw their change into the fountain. When we entered the front hallway we were instantly reminded that this is the place where Siegfried and Roy performed, because all of the gift shops lining the hallways sold things like stuffed white tigers.

Then, on our left, was a glass-enclosed room with one of their Bengal tigers in it, walking around, like it was in an exhibit in the zoo.

However, instead of the usual attempts to mock a natural setting for the animal, the tiger was in a white room with Greek columns all around and fountains pouring water into a pool. There were painted murals along the walls. It was very strange.

So Eugene and I stop and look at this tiger lazily strolling through the white marble room, and Eugene decides to say loudly things like, "Oh, that's a natural setting," and "Oh, you know the tiger's not happy in there," and "this is cruelty to animals."

I asked him not to say things like that so loudly, because people next to him can hear him.

He said he wanted people to hear him. He said he wanted to educate them.

I told him that when he blurted out things like that loudly and used no tact, the people around him will only think he's an ass. That he is actually hurting his chances of converting people because of the manner in which he behaves.

He said that he knew that he was right.

I guess that mean end of discussion.

So I asked him to please do me a favor, and please try not to ruin my evening, and if he had to say things like that, at least tonight not say them too loudly.

It seemed to work.

We walked inside. The cocktail waitresses that worked at the Mirage (Oh my God, it's a Mirage) also wore skimpy dresses.

I decided to monitor the roaming waitresses at every casino, to see if I could find a place that didn't require their waitresses to wear short skirts.

I didn't.

So Eugene decided he needed to watch the Bulls game in one of the betting rooms, but since he couldn't spend any money at the Mirage (Oh my God, it's a Mirage) because he didn't want to support a place that condoned the cruel treatment of animals, we had to move on to the next casino on the strip, Treasure Island.

The outside block of Treasure Island is decorated with a pool of water that is

churned to look like the high seas, and there are two pirate ships and a recreation of a small town in the front yard. Apparently, every hour or so there is a pirate show in the front, where the ships move and everything.

We missed the show.

But we were able to watch the Bulls game, which made Eugene happy.

We also ended up visiting the Stardust, the Frontier, the Desert Inn

and the Riviera while we walked around last night. Eugene started to gamble, just a little, with the 5¢ and 25¢ poker machines. At one point he was up by about \$5.00, but he gambled it all away.

We found a place that sold drafts of Old Milwaukee for 50¢ and margaritas in molded plastic green and clear glasses for \$1.00, so we were happy. Eugene found a place that served a dollar breakfast, so that also made him happy.

By the end of the night, I think he was actually enjoying himself, and not bitching about how Las Vegas is robbing water from the Colorado River in order to survive in a desert.

Or whatever other political tirade he could go on.

I think he started to think of the place as a sort of New Orleans. It's not supposed to be real. It's not supposed to be questioned. It's like an alternate universe.

So try to have fun.

Eventually we got tired and it was getting cold out as it got later and later, and since we didn't bring coats, we decided to go to the car and attempt to find the campground Eugene saw on the map of Nevada. I fell asleep in the car while he was looking, and he couldn't find a thing, and before I knew it we had been driving for over an hour. Eugene had no idea where he was going, but he refused to pay for another hotel.

He could eat two breakfasts at midnight, drink a ton of beer and drop dollars and dollars worth of change in slot machines, but he couldn't spend the ten dollars that would make the difference between a campground he couldn't find and a cheap hotel.

So I broke down and said I'd pay for a hotel, so we drove around town and started getting out and asking for rates. I found one that was \$35, so after checking a few other places I told him to go back to the \$35 hotel, when we passed one more hotel. Eugene said he'd check the rate. He came back out saying it was \$33.60, so I told him to park the car and I'd register. When I got in, the lady at the desk said he must have misunderstood her, because the price was \$43.60. I didn't feel like arguing.

I figured it would be better to pay the bill and not talk to Eugene.

Eugene tried to argue with the lady, but it wasn't working, so I went into the room. It was by far the most disgusting room we've rented to date. Everything smells of cigarette smoke.

Eugene offered to pay for half of it.



Then we went to sleep.

We're planning on walking around a little more today before we head out to Los Angeles. There's still the Stratosphere to see, which is a giant space needle and a miniature rendition of New York, complete with a Statue of Liberty and facades of the Chrysler building and the Empire State Building.

Oh, and don't forget the Luxor, which is a giant pyramid with a sphinx in front of it. Why did I want to travel the world, when there are imitations of so many places here?

January 31, 1998

3:10 p.m.

Visited more casinos. Went to The Luxor, and across the street we visited the Tropicana, the Excalibur, and the new "New York New York." It frightened me.

We looked at the free magazines along the sidewalks of prostitution services - oh yeah, prostitution is legal there, and so they have free magazines in bins you can take of almost completely naked women contorting themselves so you can examine them from the inside out before deciding on which one to purchase.

I remember seeing them with my sister the first time I was in Vegas, and Sandy asked me how a woman could tell her parents about her lifestyle. You know, a young girl moves out of the house early, wanting to make money and become a famous actress or something, and they end up in Vegas and they can't even get a job as a chorus girl or a waitress with one of those skimpy retarded outfits.

"But Mom, I've made it big! I'm on the cover of 'Prostitution Weekly!'"

We took more pictures and then decided it was time to move on. We had enough strangeness for one day.

Went to the Hoover Dam today. I remember when I flew into Las Vegas for the first time, my mother suggested I sit in her seat on the other side of the plane for the landing so that I could see the Hoover Dam out the window. I sat in the aisle next to my father, and he was like a little kid looking out the window. I remember him saying to himself, "Wow. Look at all the concrete."

Did I mention that he ran a construction company?

Anyway, we drove to the Hoover Dam this afternoon, and I was impressed not only by the massive size of the dam but also with the fact that there were so many people visiting it. By far the Dam was more popular than any of the national parks we had visited.



And I know it was winter, and that would explain why people weren't visiting Bryce Canyon or Arches National Park, but a part of me was hoping there were more people at Hoover Dam because people were amazed at something that man did, versus some thing that nature did.

I know that's why I was impressed with it.

But maybe I'm reading too much into this.

After taking more pictures we drove on, heading for California. I fell asleep while Eugene was driving; he woke me as I saw the sign telling us we were in California.

# Chapter 9

## California



January 31, 1998  
10:12 p.m.

Stopped in a small town for dinner. The town's claim to fame was that it had the world's tallest thermometer. It was 134 feet tall, in honor of the high temperature Death Valley reached in the early 1900s.

It wasn't actually a large glass tube filled with mercury, like I wanted it to be. It was a lighted sign that depicted the temperature. I wanted to tell them that it was just a tall display of the temperature, that it wasn't really a thermometer.

I don't think they would have liked that, though.

While driving on interstate 15 we had to stop for an agricultural checkpoint in California - they want to make sure that no one brings fruit or things that could carry insects into the area.

I thought that was strange.

So we pulled up, and the man at the booth asked us if we had any fruits or vegetables. We said no, that we didn't have any food at all. He noted that we were from Illinois, seeing our license plate. We agreed with his conclusion. Then he looked at us in the car and asked, "Aren't you going to claim the peach next to you?"

I got confused for a moment, until I realized that he was talking about me. I giggled and we drove on. Wow. I got a compliment when I was even wearing dirty clothes and had no make-up on.

I should have told him that when I clean up, I look even better.

I noticed that driving on the 10 (one of the main interstates in the Los Angeles area) was one of the most frightening experiences known to man. Now I'm used to driving in Chicago, and by far I'm a Type A driver. In fact, I think driving in Chicago are just as bad as driving in New York, so I've usually thought that I've seen the worst of traffic. Driving the 10, however, is more like driving in an auto race than in a traffic

jam, and all the competitors are out for blood. Well, there haven't been many freeway shootings lately, so I shouldn't complain.

Everyone drove very fast, and people changed lanes without discretion. It really was a bit like a video game.

At least everyone uses their turn signal here, even when changing lanes on expressways, which is something that most people in Chicago were not taught.

Arrived at Aaron and Kirsten's apartment before nine, an hour ahead of schedule. Aaron is a friend of mine that I met while on an airplane.

Oh, that sounds strange. Let me explain.

I was visiting California last year, flying in the middle of winter from O'Hare. Every flight was delayed, so I started talking to a man on the same flight. We got beers at the cocktail lounge and decided to reassign our seats so we sat next to each other on the plane.

When we got on the plane, we were goofing around and being silly, and another young man came up to our row, saying his seat was next to mine. So I tried to regain myself, so as not to be too obnoxious next to a stranger, and after introducing myself said, "If I get too irritating, let me know."

He responded, "Can I smack you?"

And I answered, "Please."

This was how I met Aaron.

I could tell that Aaron was from California - he was nice, and friendly. People from Chicago do not make jokes to strangers. People from Chicago think that strangers that come up to them are trying to rob them.

Usually, in Chicago, they're right.

Aaron was going to film school in Chicago and was going home for a weekend to visit family and friends. He tried to tell me what places I should visit; I didn't remember his suggestions, but we did exchange e-mail addresses.

I e-mailed Chris, the guy I originally met in the airport, but he never wrote me back. Aaron did. Since he was in the film world and wrote screenplays he was familiar with a few open mike venues in Chicago and invited me to one of them, run by a female friend of his.

That was the first time I ever went to an open mike, which in essence started my part-time non-paying career of speaking at open mikes and doing performance art shows.

So I really have Aaron to thank for that.

Kirsten is his high school sweetheart, they've been together for I think 45 years now, or at least that's what I say when I tease them. They moved back to Los Angeles when he was finished with school, and drove around the country to see the sights before the moved back.

Kind of like what I'm doing now.

So they've been kind enough to offer their home to Eugene and myself.

Thanks, by the way.

So we've spent the rest of the evening catching up and talking about what sights we have collectively seen when traveling around the country.



I'll wait until tomorrow to call Joe.

I discovered tonight that somewhere on this trip I've lost my pillow - I think it's at the hotel in Utah that had the outdoor hot tub. Eugene said he got everything out of the room, and I trusted him.

How silly of me.

Eugene is out getting beer now. I think we're going to just stay here tonight, try to recoup and such.

February 2, 1998

9:52 a.m.

The last time we visited Los Angeles we stayed with my friend Kevin. The first morning we woke up, a Sunday morning, Eugene had a craving for doughnuts and I had a craving for beer. (Because it was a Sunday morning, and because I was on vacation, and because I could.) So Eugene drove around Sunday morning and I sat outside reading my book at nine in the morning eating a donut and drinking a beer.

It was fun.

So this time, the first morning we're in Los Angeles (which happens to be a Sunday), Eugene wakes up and says he has a craving for doughnuts. Since I was feeling the *deja vu*, I went to the refrigerator and grabbed a beer and waited for him to return with breakfast.

Yesterday was a laid back day. It was overcast, and Aaron was working at a film festival, so Eugene and Kirsten and I watched the Bulls game. It was nice to get the chance to hang out and talk to Kirsten; since my friendship started with Aaron I haven't had that much of a chance to get to know her. I like her. She's cool. Will be fun to spend more time with them.

Then, after spending the afternoon watching the game, we headed out to Pasadena to visit Eugene's friend Scott.

As we drove along the on ramp to the expressway we saw a motorcycle cop who had pulled over a speeder. It instantly made us think of the television show *CHIPS*, since this seems to be the only place you'd see cops on motorcycles.

Scott lives with his wife, Ning, and newborn little girl, Melody Joy, in a town house in Pasadena. We got there and they had to take turns walking with her and trying to get her to sleep, so they were busy.

I don't think Eugene understands how having a baby can fill up all of your time. He was saying that Scott should have been able to get away for an hour so they could go to a bar. During the time we were there, Ning took a nap while they tried to get the two month old baby to sleep, and since she wouldn't Ning had to breast feed her again and then Scott had to watch her while Ning ate, since she hadn't had a chance to. They sleep when their baby sleeps. Their lives revolve around the baby.

And as I said, I don't think Eugene understands that.

While we were there we went to the hot tub for a bit, then we ordered pizza and had dinner with Scott while Ning tried to sleep before we came back to Los Angeles.



Which brings me to rating Scott's hot tub in relation to the other three I've experienced on this trip. I think it would have to take second place, for a number of reasons:

1. It was just about the right temperature,
2. it was large,
3. it was outside, and the breeze was just about right
4. we had a great view of the mountains, and
5. the jets weren't too painfully strong.

The only reasons why it wouldn't take first place over the Days Inn Jacuzzi in Utah is because the pool next to the hot tub here in Pasadena isn't heated, making you want to avoid it, and because it didn't have multiple jets controlled by different dials.

But I'm not that picky. It was very nice.

Aaron and Kirsten loaned me a book about theories about make aggression in humans being possibly related to primate aggression, so I've been reading it. I'm about two thirds the way done. If nothing else, I like the title of the book: "Demonic Males."

Kirsten was suggesting that alcohol influences violent behavior, and said that when men get together and get drunk, their first impulse is to "blow stuff up" or "break things."

And she added, "And when women get together and get drunk..."

And I finished, "... they talk about their emotions and start crying."

We had a good laugh over that.

This morning it's raining. I don't know what we're going to do today. Eugene is sleeping, of course, so I can't ask him. Aaron and Kirsten have plans tonight, so maybe we'll be able to visit with Joe. We'll see.

February 2, 1998

4:22 p.m.

I'm in a bar right now in Pasadena called The Colorado. I've hung out here before; it's right by Scott's house and Joe has met me here before. Eugene is reading the newspaper and I noticed ads on the page he was looking at for penile enlargements.

"Achieve greater self-esteem though increased length and girth."

Tonight Joe is going to meet us at the Colorado; we're going to go to another bar to watch the Bulls game and then come back here to meet him

Joe is a character. I dated Joe nearly nine years ago, when we first entered college together. We were both engineers. (I told you it was a long time ago.) I think in many ways Joe reminded me of who I was, and shaped me into who I am. Joe is a workhorse. Joe is an extremely intelligent hard worker with a one-track mind. And yes, I think I had these tendencies before I met him, but I think he reminded me that it was possi-



ble to do work that you love precisely because you love it, not because it pays the rent or because it's what is expected of you or because it's what is acceptable.

And for that I will always be grateful.

The problem with dating Joe, at least at the time and at least for me, was that he the most religiously devout person I had ever met. (Ah, that atheist/Judeo-Christian combo never works...) He saved part of his income for his church, we would not do work or be social on the Sabbath, the whole nine yards.

And he had real issues with dating me.

But I can say honestly that he's one of the few people in this world that I respect, one of the few people in this world that I think I will ever respect. He was the person that introduced me to the writing of Ayn Rand (and some of you may think that's a bad thing, but I value it). He is the type of person who cares nothing about trends or fashion or music on the charts, but cares worlds about learning and debate and intelligence.

He's fascinating to talk to. His outlook on life is like no one's I've ever met. It's refreshing. Scary sometimes, but refreshing.

So this is why I like to still visit him. I know he doesn't think of me often, he can get lost in his work for literally months and forget that I'm coming into town, but it doesn't matter, because talking to him makes me feel so much better about life.

I never told him this, but in my office I had a few photographs framed on top of my bookshelf. One of them was of him. I had it there because it would make me feel better when I had to deal with the incompetence of my coworkers to be able to look at that photo and remember that there were people somewhere in the world with intelligence who valued hard work and reason and logic.

Well, he kind of lacked the logic thing when it came to religion. But in every other aspect of his life... Well, you know what I mean.

The first time I ever visited California, in fact, was on a trip I took just as Joe and I were breaking up. Oh, it was a nightmare. I was visiting for six days, and he had told me in advance to bring my nice dresses, because he was going to take me to these nice restaurants... And when I got in from the airport on Friday night he was late picking me up, and when I finally found him he told me we weren't going straight home, so I figured we were going to a club or something, and he told me he was taking me camping north of San Francisco.

Now, keep in mind that I was wearing a suede shirt and matching suede shoes, and at the time I abhorred camping.

Actually, I still do abhor camping. But I tolerate it to save money.

Also keep in mind that I was prepared for sightseeing in Southern California, that I only had six days to spend there, and that I had no clothes for camping, much less no blankets, sleeping bags or pillows.

So we drove about six hours (and we even had car trouble in the middle of the night on an empty highway) to get to a campsite with a bunch of his religious friends by four in the morning so they could wake up at dawn and drive to a nearby church.

I stayed at the campsite.

Did I mention that I had my period during all of this?

So there was only one other person out of the ten people there that didn't belong to his church, and one morning he hit on me and tried to kiss me while I was sleeping outside. I fell asleep outside the tents at a fire with a few other people, but by dawn apparently there was just me and this other guy, Dan. I opened my eyes and this man I barely knew was leaning over trying to kiss me, and when I gained my bearings I pushed him away.

Well, I know this is going to sound like something that only happens on "Melrose Place" or some other cheesy soap opera style drama, but apparently Joe got up from his tent to go to the bathroom, opening his tent and looking up just in time to see this Dan guy kissing me, and then turned back into his tent before he could see me pushing him away.

And although we were breaking up, that was still a big issue.

So he continued to treat me like crap for the rest of my trip. I was trapped at the campsite for four days out of six. Instead of taking me to the Pasadena fireworks show for Independence Day, he took me to some small suburb's show. Instead of showing me the sights, he took me to a movie. That was a bad move for many reasons:

1. I usually hate movies.
  2. I wanted to see Los Angeles; I could see a movie any time.
  3. I really hate action movies.
  4. He took me to "Die Harder With a Vengeance," which involved watching airplanes exploding.
  5. I was flying back home the next morning.
- Oh, I could have killed him.

He even overslept the morning I had to leave for the airport, so a friend of his had to drive me.

I could mention more. But I think you get the idea.

So I figure the least he owes me is the use of his hot tub.

He better have heated it.

February 2, 1998

7:59 p.m.

Okay, so we're watching the Bulls game at this bar called Moose McGillicuddy's. It reminds me of the last time we were in Southern California, because we took a day trip to Tiajuana. We went on a Monday afternoon, and decided to stop in a bar for a drink. Beers were two for one, so we got a bucket of beers, then the waiter brought us free shots of tequila. Eugene doesn't drink hard liquor, so I drank his for him. because I mean, when in Rome... I ended up drinking around 13 shots and we met a few people from San Diego and they brought is back to the United States and showed us where they worked... Which was a chain restaurant/bar called Moose McGillicuddy's.

So now we're at one of these Moose McGillicuddy's in Pasadena, and I have now become painfully aware of the fact that happy hours have now only been abolished from Illinois.

When I was in college, I remember Governor Edgar passing a law banning happy

hours - in other words, banning sale prices of liquor during specific hours of the day. So for the past eight years or so I've been used to not having a happy hour. So then I go into this Moose McGillicuddy's and they have a happy hour that lasts until 8:00 p.m. where all drinks are half off. So instead of beer I decide to go for their fruity mixed drinks. The first one was the melon moose. the second one was called purple haze. The one I now have is called the Hawaiian punch. I'm trying to stop myself from drinking more, because I'm used to drinking beer and I feel pretty tipsy.

So I'm sitting here trying to finish my last drink and Jacob, that's our waiter, he offers us another drink, on him.

I guess I'm not meant to be sober tonight.

Jacob just explained to us that he was an actor, and he just lost a part in "As The World Turns" because of his height. The man that got the part was three inches shorter than him.

And I stood up talking to our waiter, and he couldn't have been more than 6' or 6'1". But then again, Tom Cruise is 5'6".

That's Hollywood for you.

February 2, 1998

10:01 p.m.

Entry by Joseph Zlab

*Hello, this is a quick jot from Joe. Janet is almost drunk and my hot tub isn't working.... We are talking around beers with Eugene and his friend Scott. The music here at The Colorado has been swinging back and forth from hard rock, to Prince, to 70's. When I was in Seattle last new years CA passed the no smoking law. I'm happy to report that this bar isn't complying....we already have too many rules. The conversation here has just taken a dive to third world whores. We will have to move on to another place.*



February 4, 1998

5:46 p.m.

California passed a law that bars and restaurants have to be no smoking.

I think it's ridiculous that the government tries to tell individual bar owners how to run their establishments. If they want a smoking bar, then their employees can work somewhere else if they don't like it, and their customers can go somewhere else if they don't like it.

That's how the market is supposed to work. Good thing we have the government to come in and interfere, though.

Went to the Getty Museum Yesterday. An oil mogul donated a ton of money for an art museum to be built on the top of a hill in Los Angeles. The building is more beautiful than the art inside.

Kirsten went out with Eugene and I today; we attempted to go to the Museum of Science and Industry today but it was closed. Managed to see the La Brea Tar Pits. Eugene wanted to take a stick with some tar on it as a souvenir. I told him he had stolen

enough rocks taking up space in my car and I didn't want the pack rat to take a stick with some tar on it into my car.

He finally gave up on it.

Went to the beach. It was sunny today, but with the storms that have been around recently it was very windy. We saw on the Santa Monica Pier a film crew taping a 1-800-COLLECT commercial with the guy who used to play Ed Bundy on *Married With Children*. He was saying to a mime, "Dial 1-800-COLLECT. It's the only way to dial collect." He was wearing a windbreaker that said "Phone Patrol" in huge letters on the back.

As we were walking down the pier, away from the taping, Eugene kept saying that he should have gone right up to him and said (imagine a bad surfer voice here), "Hey, you look just like Ed Bundy."

Am getting a well-deserved and desperately needed break from Eugene tonight. Right now we're watching the Bulls game at a bar, but later Joe is meeting with me and we're going out.

February 7, 1998

9:44 p.m.

The remainder of our stay in Southern California ran a similar course to the first days. I hung out with Joe; we played pool and toured through Long Beach. We hung out with Kirsten and Aaron; we walked through the U.C.L.A. campus. Since we're going to be in California for another week, Friday morning we decided to drive up the coast into San Francisco for the weekend.

The drive wasn't much fun - it took about seven hours and it was raining 70% of the time. My friend Eve offered her home to us. Eve is a friend of my friend Brian Tolle's in Indiana (I'll be visiting him on my way back home). Eve is living in a studio with friend Eric, so there are two full-sized beds in the middle of the living room; there's not much room for anything else. Eve has stacked next to her bed ten piles of books, each about three feet tall, lined up against the wall. I hope we don't take up too much space while we're here and get on their nerves.

Eve has concerts to go to on each night we're staying here, so last night I didn't get to see her; we went to a bar everyone recommended which was down the street from Eve's apartment and found some of Eve's friends there. It was a Jazz club; the musicians were all older, and the grandmother playing drums fascinated us. We played Gin Rummy at our table.

After a while everyone decided it was time to move on. Some people wanted to go to a second bar, but since it was a farther walk and I had already spent enough money I declined and walked home. Eugene decided to go on with the remaining people.

So I expected him to be ringing Eve's buzzer at 2:30 in the morning, shortly after all the bars closed. I woke up every hour waiting for him. He never came home. So I figure that if he's:

1. in an alley,
2. in jail, or

3. in the hospital,

I have no reason to be angry. But if he crashed at a friend of Eve's and couldn't bother to call so no one would worry, then I think I have a right to be angry.

Not that I wanted him here; in fact, it was nice to have the break. But you know, for some reason I expect him every once in a while to be considerate of me. Silly me.

Oh, he just came home. Apparently he's not dead.

So when people get back home today we're supposed to tour San Francisco. There's a party tonight.

We'll see what mischief I can get into later.

February 10, 1998

9:55 a.m.

The next night in San Francisco I met up with my friend Camille. We used to work together at the, well, at the place I prefer not to talk about... In fact, she was the one who interviewed and hired me. During the interview she had to leave the room for a bit and she asked me to pick a tape to play on the stereo. I saw that the Cure's "Head on the Door" was there, so I played that. When she came back, she said that I made such a cool pick that I had to be hired.

I hope I was hired for more than that.

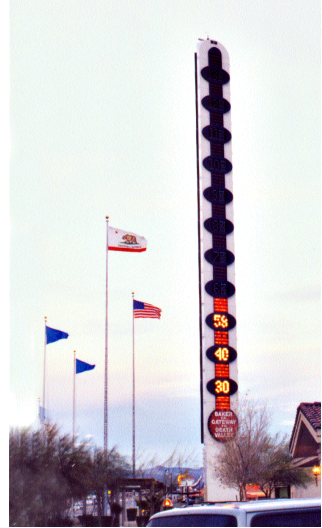
I think her title was Marketing Director, or something like that. That's the problem - in her field, and in quite a few others in that company - the boss would periodically decide that the company doesn't need a position like that, or a department like that, and rearrange everyone and fire a group of people. As I've said before, it's amazing that somehow that office manages to still run.

Camille is now at a company she's much happier in, and more successful at, and seems to be doing well. She even runs in marathons a few times a year.

So we got a chance to catch up . We went to an Ethiopian restaurant (I know, I'm going to have to get an Ethiopian cookbook or something- I have to learn how to make that bread), and then to a bar for a few drinks.

After saying good-bye to Camille I once again found myself hanging out with the under 21 crowd... Eve was at another concert and we knew of a party about a mile from us, so Eugene and I walked to the party. There was a cover, which we didn't expect and had no money for, so we managed to beg our way in, only for me to find that there were so many people there you couldn't stand anywhere without getting hit by someone walking by. We found a few people that we met the night before, so I felt comfortable in letting Eugene stay there while I just walked home.

Outside there were groups of people standing on the sidewalk, possibly feeling as claustrophobic as I did. I struck up a conversation with a few of them, and then I walked home.



The next day I waited for Eugene to get up, of course, and then we toured around again. By the evening we decided to go out to dinner, but first we visited Eric at Border's Bookstore, where he worked. Since I had been on a fruitless search for hard cover Ayn Rand books, I consulted Eve's magic fortune-telling eight ball toy (remember those?) and asked if Border's would have them (I was pretty sure they wouldn't - no one ever seems to).

The eight ball told me, "You can count on it."

So filled with a new sense of confidence in my quest (I mean, the eight ball doesn't lie, does it?) we went to Border's.

They had "Atlas Shrugged," "Anthem," "We The Living" and "The Journals of Ayn Rand," all in hard cover.

So of course I had to buy them all.

And I had to get a biography about her as well, written by a woman she worked with, a woman whose husband had an affair with Ayn Rand.

Should be an interesting read.

Managed to get a few other interesting books, and a nice discount, so I left happy.

I left with a lot less money, but I was happy.

The eight ball doesn't lie.

So then we went to dinner. "The Stinking Rose" was a place I felt I needed to take Eugene to, even if it was a chain. Their specialty is garlic (hence the stinking rose reference); garlic is in every dish, garlic is in the pesto and the olive oil on the table, garlic makes up some of the appetizers, there's even a garlic ice cream dessert.

And I like garlic.

I've had a theory about garlic. Once when Eugene and I were walking through the forest preserve, the mosquitoes were attacking Eugene and not me. I had eaten a ton of garlic, so I figured it was a natural repellent (don't you love the validity of my scientific experiments?). My theory is that this may be where some of the folklore from vampires came from - they are bloodsuckers, like mosquitoes, and according to legend they are repelled by garlic.

It's just a theory.

So we ate enough garlic at dinner to smell for days (it's been a day and a half, and I can still smell it on me), and we went back home to see Eve. She called from a friend's to confirm that she's home. So after a while, when she didn't show up, we consulted the magic fortune telling eight ball. We asked if Eve was coming home that night.

It said, "It looks doubtful."

The eight ball doesn't lie.

We left San Francisco the next day, Monday, all with probably seeing Eve for a total of 45 minutes.

I feel bad, that I came to visit on such a busy weekend for her. I wish I could have seen her more.

We made it into Pasadena Monday night and stayed at a bar down the street from Joe's house so he could meet us. I was reading a book by Carl Sagan at the bar, which I suppose is strange, and what I'd guess was the owner came up to us and started talking



about us reading in the bar. I explained that the book was basically about debunking pseudoscience - UFOs, astrology, clairvoyance, ESP and the like. She then proceeded to tell me that her father was a geologist and saw something up in the sky in the 50s that he couldn't explain - and he should know what everything is in the sky, because he's a geologist... (I'm not expecting you to understand this...) and her uncle flew planes for the Air Force and he saw strange things flying in the sky that he couldn't explain, and she's sure they were UFOs. And when she was three - and she told me this in great detail and with great sincerity - she woke up from her bed and looked out the window and saw what she explained as a bunch of glowing balloons in the sky. She then hurriedly ran downstairs to tell her grandmother to look out the window, and when she did the glowing balloons were gone. But she knows she wasn't dreaming. And she said that when she looked out the window she felt a warm feeling around her, like she was being loved (at this point she wrapped her arms around herself, like she was being hugged), and that she was sure there was a supernatural presence there.

Now, how can you argue with that?

I explained that alien abduction stories, and the things people go through in the aftermath, are very similar in description to stories and events of rape victims. I also explained that it seems that some therapists have either unknowingly or knowingly led their patients to an alien abduction story. I told her that some insects are actually slightly electrically charged and when they pass through a magnetic field glow - and that a swarm of these insects, moving quickly, changing formations and directions in an instant, glowing in a magnetic field and then disappearing as soon as they leave the magnetic field, could be mistaken for what people think are flying saucers. I mentioned that the U.S. military secretly works on aircraft that may be capable of doing things that the U.S. population can't imagine - and that it has to remain secret for military purposes. I also brought up the fact that the U.S. military at the time of her father's sightings and her balloon sightings, were doing tests with balloons to detect Soviet missiles and aircraft.

She didn't like my arguments at all. Apparently a geologist knows military secret aircraft, and she knows what are military tracking balloons and what are aliens spaceships, at the ripe old age of three.

I thought about the fact that when I was little I had a recurring dream that I could fly - that I remember these dreams so vividly, flying only in the house, down from the top of the stairs, turning before I hit the windows, gliding into the front room or the kitchen. I know I didn't fly, but I dreamt it enough - and it has been so long - that I can't remember that they were dreams. If I trusted my heart, and what I felt, I could say that I was sure that I did fly when I was a little girl. The dreams seemed that real. But I know as an adult, and even as a child I knew, that I couldn't fly, and that I didn't fly. My mind was just playing tricks on me.

I figured that if I told her that, though, I'd have to explain that what I meant by that was that maybe she, at 55, shouldn't trust what she thought she saw as the three year old.

But I'm sure that would have just made her angrier.

So I told her that for every sighting there are a number of possibilities. I'm not say-

ing that life on other planets doesn't exist. What I am saying is that the theory that these objects seen in the sky are aliens is the most farfetched of all the theories out there, and there is absolutely no evidence to support it. There is no acknowledged alien technology. There are no bona fide alien bodies. And all the theories should be tested before we come to a conclusion, and as far as I can tell, the least fantastic theory will probably be the one to prove to be true.

She didn't like that answer either.

I asked her that if aliens were so smart as to be able to make it here, how could they be so stupid as to then be hidden by the government? If they want to talk to the people, don't you think they would have been able to make themselves public by now?

Her answer was that they were working secretly with the government.

So I decided to give up on the argument.

If they're not playing on the same battlefield, if your opponent is not using logic or reason or anything that resembles the scientific method, how can you have a rational debate?

So I continued with my book.

So now we are in Pasadena again, this time staying at Joe's. I'm doing laundry now (you have no idea how happy that makes me). The only thing more important to me right now than clean clothes on my body are clean clothes on Eugene's body.

So I'm making him wash some of his clothes, too.

February 11, 1998

10:22 p.m.

Went back to the bar Moose McGillicuddy's. The bartender swore constantly and informed us that he thought all Chicagoans were ass-holes. We didn't do a thing to this bartender; I had no idea why he was acting that way. Eugene postulated to me that maybe the bartender wasn't really being mean; that maybe he just had Turrets Syndrome. Then the bartender handed me my drink, punctuating his "Here you go" with what I thought was the word "bitch." I fumed for a few minutes, then I asked him to repeat what he said. He said he couldn't remember. I flew off the handle. I had to walk away from the bar to cool off.

He gave us most of our drinks for free and apologized profusely.

I can't go back to that bar again.

February 12, 1998

5:59 p.m.

Both Eugene and I have been to Southern California before. When we were here last year we did all of the touristy things - I put my hands in Marilyn Monroe's hand prints in front of Mann's Chinese Theatre, Eugene did a one-armed push-up over Jack Palance's star on the boulevard, we drove as close as we could to the Hollywood sign, we visited the beaches. So now we're being a bit more laid back.

Trying to get a little reading done. I've noticed that ever since I've been on this trip I've had to drink a lot of water - I always feel dehydrated now. Don't know why.

Got a hold of my friend Steve, who lives in Las Vegas. I haven't talk to him in a long time, so we're going to visit him in a few days. It will be our break before we start camping in Arizona and New Mexico.

Joe lives in a house with friends of his, including his friend Kevin, his friend Andrew and Andrew's wife Jonelle, and Jonelle's brother. Drew and Jonelle have a cat - Sterling is her name. She's a cutie. It reminds me of what a pretentious snob Eugene's cat is back home.

In fact, over half of the places I've stayed at have had cats. The rundown:

First cat encounter: Denver, Colorado, at Dave Adrian's apartment. He had two cats, Soze (pronounced "so-say") and Kaiser. Two white cats with black patches on them. Cute cats. Dave moved into a new apartment while we were there, and one of the cats enjoyed walking into the soot-filled fireplace, which was apparently a new experience for both Dave and his cat. These are the cats that would try to hump each other when Eugene meowed at them constantly for two minutes. They're both fixed, but something about Eugene's voice when he



meowed at the cats would make the male try to jump the female, at which point the female would start fighting. It was cruel, granted, but it was good entertainment.

Second cat encounter: Christen's cat, also in Denver, who's name escapes me. For now I will call it "Psycho Cat." Psycho Cat was a mix between something and a Siamese - the cat had the color of a Siamese cat but the facial bone structure of a regular cat. Friendly cat, but the time of day it seemed to want to play the most was in the middle of the night. Batting a ball noisily around the hardwood floors was one of Psycho Cat's tricks, but Psycho's favorite game was batting at our feet while we slept through the blankets, making us bleed. Meowed incessantly if you tried to lock the cat out of your room. Charming cat. Christen just got the cat about a week earlier; it had come from an abusive home.

Third cat encounter: small grey cat in Utah. We were getting gas in front of a general store and there was this friendly cat trotting up to me and rubbing herself up against my leg. Wanted to take her along on the trip with us, but a cat in a cramped car with us for two months didn't sound like a good idea; besides, the cat had a collar. I played with the cat while Eugene filled the gas tank and we got supplies.

Fourth cat encounter: Macon, Eric's cat, in San Francisco. He was a male cat, white with brown and black patches. Friendly cat, but then again, if you've never dealt with Eugene's cat, you might not think that all other cats are nice, the way I do. Eugene kept calling the cat Macon Bacon. Helpful hint: litter boxes are more noticeable through smell if you live in a studio apartment. We'd put Macon on my feet when my feet were cold.

Fifth cat encounter: Sterling, Andrew and Jonelle's cat, in Pasadena, California. Meows more like a frog than a cat. It's cute. Sterling's trick is to get outside through a window, then jump up the back door until she reaches the window. Then you see this

little cat head through the window about four feet up, and when you look through the window you can see that she's holding herself up by clawing at the window frame in the door. I hear that if you open the door quickly enough, she will remain hanging while you swing the door open.

Eugene's cat doesn't do any tricks.

The closest thing to entertainment we get out of the cat is when she comes up to us and we are eating dinner. Now we're both vegetarians, and I like to put a ton of garlic in my food. You'd think that the cat (who's name is technically Sequoia, but we call her Poo) would learn by now that she wouldn't like our food. So when we walk toward us, I offer my plate for her to smell. As soon as she gets close enough and gets a whiff of garlic, she contorts her face and bolts for the other side of the apartment.

That reminds me of a cat my friend Sheri had in Arizona, called Jo Jo. Jo Jo's trick was to catch bugs and eat them, but once, when I was in the apartment by myself, the cat caught a bee. I thought nothing of it until it apparently stung her tongue, at which point she bugged her eyes out, contorted her face, then shook her head and flung the dead bee across the room. She made a few more interesting faces before she walked over to her water bowl.

But I'm getting off the subject.

Sixth cat encounter: a cat owned by some lady in a small town about a half hour south of Tijuana. We were at a bar called Raul's having a beer when we saw this woman walking her cat, while it wore a leash. It wanted to go over to the bird cage, which had about twenty small birds in it, but the harness, which looked like one of those contraptions some people use for torture to hold back their toddlers with when they go to the mall.

Oh, but wait, I didn't tell you yet about my day trip to Mexico.



# Chapter 10

## Mexico



February 12, 1998

7:27 p.m.

I went to Tiajuana the last time I was in Southern California with Eugene. Eugene didn't really have any great desire to go; he'd much rather see parks and forests and things that have nothing to do with mankind, whereas I prefer going to cities and the like.

That's just one of our little differences.

But the same way I get really excited about going to another state, I really wanted to go to Mexico so I could say I had been to a different country. Tiajuana is the city right at the border, not a half-hour from Dan Diego, and since it was only two hours away from Los Angeles, I convinced Eugene to go.

I was told before we left that Tiajuana was a dirty place. I had no idea how dirty it would really be, though. The streets are really tiny and not well maintained, the shops are crammed along the sides of the streets. There is a stop sign at every block. The Spanish word for stop is "alto." Men try to flag you into driving into their auto transmission shops. On a few streets you see a man with a camera and a donkey fully painted to look like a zebra, waiting for you to spend your money on a tourist photo in Tiajuana. They even supply a sombrero if you'd like to wear one in your photo. There are a ton of bars, mostly dance clubs. Shop owners stand at the sidewalk and try to convince you to come into their store. The desperately want American money.

The first time we went there we park the car and went into a bar. We sat on the second floor at the corner, so we had a good view of the dingy street intersection. We ordered a beer, and the waiter told us that beers were two for one. We agreed, and a few minutes later a bucket of beers sat on our table. Then the waiter brought us a complimentary shot of tequila.

Eugene refuses to drink anything other than beer, and even though I don't do shots

and tequila is not one of my favorite hard liquors, I did the shot. Had the lime and the salt, too - the whole nine yards. Someone had to tell me what the order was for doing a shot of tequila - lick some salt from off your hand, do the shot and then suck on the lime. Actually, it didn't taste that bad.

I should have known then I was in trouble.

Three Americans sat at the table next to us, and when I saw the camera on their table, I figured they were like us and doing the touristy thing. I offered to take their picture, and then we started talking. Tammy, Janice and Justin lived in San Diego and were playing hooky on that particular Monday afternoon to go to Tiajuana. So we decided to hang out for the rest of the day together.

We drank more beer. They kept giving us free shots. At one point, at bar number two, the bartender, wearing a sombrero and blowing on a whistle (apparently to create a more festive atmosphere) threw a napkin around my neck and poured tequila down my throat. When he was done he shook my head and smashed a paper cup on top of my head (apparently that's festive too). Eugene estimated that in addition to my beer I had about thirteen shots of tequila.

We were dancing to the Macarena in a bar in Mexico at four in the afternoon with these people we just met and being otherwise generally silly. They invited us to a bar that Tammy worked at in San Diego, so we went back there and danced and drank (actually, that was when I decided to drink water) until late at night. They offered to let us sleep in their apartment.



All in all, it was another example of the kindness of strangers and an experience that probably would never happen again.

But we went back to Tiajuana again, just in case.

Joe suggested that we drive an hour south of Tiajuana in to the country more, to a town called Ensenada, where it wasn't as dirty or as much of a tourist trap. Joe equated Tiajuana with his armpit.

So we took his advice and arrived in Ensenada by about three in the afternoon yesterday, after paying almost six American dollars in tolls. (Yes, six dollars to go 60 miles. And they obviously don't use the toll money to repair the roads...). We discovered that Ensenada was still pretty dirty, and their beer was more expensive.

So we decided to drive along the highway frontage road in an attempt to circumvent the tolls. We only managed to avoid one of the toll stations. We periodically stopped at bars along the beach and had a beer. When getting into Tiajuana border patrol stopped us and checked our papers and wanted to look through our car. Even though we look European, I suppose that having a dusty car with the back seats filled to capacity with junk makes you look a bit suspicious when you're approaching the U.S. border.

We parked on one of the main streets and went to a bar. The first bar had a circular slide on the top floor that went all the way down to the first floor of the bar. At this point we had been drinking enough that we couldn't even remember the name Ensenada - we thought it was "ensalada", and from then on called the town "salad town."



We watched someone working at one of the bars we were at add windows to the front porch since it was getting a little cooler. None of the windows actually fit in the spaces; the man, however, was equipped with pieces of wood so that he could cram the windows into place. One of them fell on a customer; it seems that the window wasn't stuffed securely into place.

This isn't a ritzy place. As I said before, they're dying for American money.

We finally managed to get some food, and then realized that we had so little cash that we'd have to go to a cash station. On Wednesday nights most of the bars charged a cover, but were all-you-can-drink bars, so once we paid to get in we wouldn't have to spend any more money. None of the bars would accept credit cards, so we figured all we needed was enough money to pay the cover.

We had two American dollars between the both of us. We needed eight.

So we went to the cash station. The dollar amounts (not American, mind you) available to withdraw were \$50, \$100, \$200 and \$1,500. In American, that roughly translates to six, twelve, 24 and 185 dollars. I couldn't understand why someone would withdraw the equivalent of only six dollars. But seeing that that was all I needed, we were in luck.

When we got into the bar I realized that all you could drink didn't just apply to beer but to mixed drinks as well.

So I thought it would be a good idea to switch from drinking beer to drinking fuzzy navel.

I should have known then I was in trouble.

We watched a poor guy sitting drinking by himself try to hit on a few women, each time failing miserably. I felt bad for him. Eugene kept suggesting that I hit on him, but I refused. At one point while I was dancing he came onto the floor and danced with me.

Now I know why the women were rejecting him.

He looked a little like a robot.

A robot having convulsions.

So I talked to a few people while I was there, and drank more, and when we decided to leave I discovered that I didn't feel too good. I fell asleep in the car as we got onto U.S. soil. However, Eugene's slowing down and turning into the gas station in San Diego didn't agree with my stomach at all, so I woke up and told Eugene that I thought

I was about to throw up.

He tried to drive over to a corner of the gas station parking lot so that I would be out of the way if I just got out of the car and threw up on the ground, but he never got the chance to stop. I immediately rolled down the window and just leaned out of the car and started vomiting while Eugene drove. I apparently continued vomiting while he drove around the entire parking lot, trying to get to a gas pump.

You would almost think that I was making a conscious effort to throw up on every part of their parking lot, but trust me, it was not my intention.

I tried to recover while Eugene filled up the gas tank. He told me he had to walk around my vomit to get to the store to pay for the gas. While he was paying, I got out of the car and did my best to clean the side of my car with paper towels and windshield washer fluid.

For being drunk and sick, I did a pretty good job.

After removing most of the hard alcohol from my body, I felt much better and managed to sleep the entire two-hour drive home. The next thing I remembered was Eugene stopping the car in Joe's driveway.

Every time I go to Tiajuana I drink too much and do something stupid.

I should learn my lesson.

Well, at least you know now that my reporting is honest, that I'm not covering up the embarrassing moments.

Actually, every time I get to the point where I'm too drunk and end up throwing up, it's usually so urgent that I end up puking somewhere very public.

At least I'm usually so drunk when I do it that I'm not even embarrassed by vomiting in public.

In a nutshell, Tiajuana is pretty much an alternate universe, the way that Las Vegas or New Orleans is, much on a much different level.

And if you can't hold your liquor, just don't go there. Trust me.





# Chapter 11

## Heading to Arizona

### Mohave Desert & Las Vega

February 16, 1998

6:51 p.m. MT

So we spent the last nights of California with Joe and with Aaron and Kirsten. I had a chance to have some good antagonistic conversations with Joe (he likes to push my buttons by telling me about how women are inferior to men - he doesn't believe it, but he likes pushing my buttons), and I got a chance one more time to hang out with Aaron and Kirsten.

We visited with Scott for one last time, and then we left for camping Saturday morning. Our plan was to stay at a campground in the Mohave Desert for Saturday night so that none of my friends had to put up with us on Valentine's Day, and meet up with my friend Steve Oster in Las Vegas by Sunday. We arrived in the Mohave Desert by nightfall. There was a sign on the road telling us to be careful for there were cows and burros in the area and they could cross the street at any point. The gravel roads were difficult to drive on. Certain kinds of clay and dirt, when driven on repeatedly, start receding in grooves that resemble the waves of ocean water on the sand below. These grooves cross the dirt and gravel roads, and feel like you're driving on the grooved patches of road before you hit a tollbooth - except this is a lot stronger and a lot more painful. After over ten miles of this ugly road we made it to the campsite. Not only was there a charge to camp, but also it was also full - with big buses and recreational vehicles. It occurred to us that in the desert, on the dry ground, there may not be as many patches to even be able to camp on, because there are sporadic plants keeping the ground from blowing away.

So we continued on. Eugene was suggesting a hotel, which surprised me. before we managed to get to the second (last) campsite, it started to rain.

In the desert. Yes, the Mohave Desert probably gets between three and nine inches of rainfall a year, and we happened to attempt to camp there on one of the few nights

during the year where it actually rained.

So we agreed on the hotel idea. We didn't know where one was, but we assumed we'd be able to find a small hotel just outside of the park, on the north side. So we continued driving.

That's when I noticed that the car looked like it was overheating. The gauge was heading toward that little "H", instead of staying in the middle. We stopped the car and waited for it to cool down. We noticed that it was when we drove slowly that it started to overheat - which we pretty much needed to do to get around the grooves in the road and the crevasses that were like gigantic potholes in the dirt road. We started moving again, and it seemed okay. Then the fog set in. Could barely see twenty feet in front of us. Which of course made us want to drive slowly.

Which wasn't an option.

Did I mention that while driving through the fog Eugene last minute had to slam on his brakes because there were about ten cows crossing the street in front of us?

Eugene kept telling me, "Well, at least we're having an adventure."

It didn't make me feel any better.

Then it started raining harder, and lightning bolts started flashing around in the mountains. It's strange to see lightning near the mountains; it's not something that regularly occurs. So I was marveling at the lightning, and then I realized that we were the only piece of metal in the middle of this desert for miles. Eugene suggested that as long as we were not touching metal, being hit by lightning wouldn't kill us. Comforting.

So then we proceeded and Eugene had to mention that in this rainstorm in the middle of the desert, surrounded by mountains, there is a possibility of a flash flood. I asked him if he was trying to make me feel bad.

A flash flood could mean a number of things, but the worst-case scenario would be that we would be floated off the road, our car would be flooded...

But that's just my mind imaging the worst.

So it finally started to clear up and we didn't need to have the wipers on their super-hyper-fast speed, and then the fog cleared up so we could see and could use our high beams again. Then we got onto something that resembled a real road and we didn't have to worry so much about potholes or grooved roads.

So I was feeling better.

So we continued driving and got out of the park and couldn't find a hotel anywhere, so Eugene pushed onward and I tried to get some rest. Within an hour we were in Nevada, which was not in our plans. We stopped at a casino/hotel, and discovered that most every hotel in all of Southern Nevada, including Las Vegas, was full, considering that it was Valentine's Day as well as a long weekend in honor of President's Day. Great.

So Eugene continued pressing on, stopping at pretty much every exit and asking someone in some hotel if they had room, and each time he got the same answer. By the time he had given up, it was after midnight and we were in Las Vegas.

I knew I couldn't call Steve, I didn't want to disturb him at that hour, so I suggested a National Recreation Area that I saw on the map that looked like it was ten or twenty miles away from Las Vegas. We drove to it, discovered that it was BLM land (Bureau

of Land Management - which means it can be used for free by anyone for things like camping, even if there is no campsite), and drove to a viewpoint and slept in the car.

It was very uncomfortable. I woke up at dawn with the sunlight and let Eugene sleep for a while. By Seven thirty Sunday morning we drove to a small bar to get a beer and breakfast.

As I said, I'm on vacation.

And after the past night, I needed a beer - even if it was eight o'clock on a Sunday morning.

I've noticed on this trip that there is a repetition of drinking beer on Sunday mornings.

So after breakfast we decided to go to the Hilton off of the strip and act like we were staying at the



hotel so we could use the hot tub. After sleeping in the car, I thought we deserved it.

I remember the hot tub from my two past trips to Las Vegas. It's about 30 feet in diameter, the jets are perfect, it's not too hot and the steam doesn't get in your face because the outdoor breeze whisks it away.

Or something like that.

So we walked out to the pool deck. I noticed a few things:

1. The pool was empty.
2. It was windy as Hell.

But the hot tub was open so we changed and got in. The hot tub was as good feeling as I remember, but we estimated that the winds were about 30 miles per hour. The winds were actually splashing water in our faces.

But we stayed anyway.

We passed the strip and I said my chant when we passed The Mirage (Oh, my God, it's a Mirage).

We went out for lunch at some dive (there was no point in going to somewhere on the strip - even though they have good food specials there, they're all meaty, you know, lobster and steak meals, so there's not much point in vegetarians going there to eat). After lunch we went to the Luxor to watch the Bulls game. Steve met us at the Luxor at 5:00. We watched the people next to us lose \$900 on the Bulls game because the Bulls didn't beat the spread.

This is why I don't gamble.

We went back to Steve's mom's apartment where we met Steve's mother and grand-

mother. His mother is a very nice woman; she even wanted to read to me a poem she wrote to see what I thought about it. Steve's grandmother is the spunkiest grandmother I've met in a long time. At one point she announced, "Don't go there - talk to the hand." I gave each of them a copy of my first book. They seemed pleased.

We all went to a casino near their home together called The Reserve. It was decorated something like the Rainforest Cafe - the ceilings were painted like the sky, there were fake trees all over the place, jungle noises and fake animals along the walls.

Cosmopolitans were only \$3.00 each. That made me happy.

So Steve and Eugene and I sat at a table and talked about all sorts of things, mostly politics and philosophy, which is surprising, because in the past Steve and I have been known to lock horns and raise our voices and generally want to kill each other. Eugene took a gambling break and played Texas Holdum (which is a version of poker). He only lost about \$10 in an hour and a half, and I'm sure he drank more than \$10 in free drinks while he was gambling at the table. He played the slots for a bit and came out \$12 ahead.

Not a bad night.

So Steve and I caught up and had a good time. I haven't talked to him for about three or four years; so it was nice to see him again.

We went back to Steve's mom's apartment and hung out. We visited their outdoor hot tub, which wasn't half bad, considering the cool breeze. Eugene looked like he was about to pass out in the hot tub, so we decided to go in. They made food and we crashed.

In the morning we headed out again. I said good-bye to Steve and the tackiness of Las Vegas. We drove past the Hoover Dam again, and shortly afterward we were approaching Arizona in our quest to see the Grand Canyon.



# Chapter 12

## Arizona



February 16, 1998  
8:28 p.m.

My grandmother died while I was finishing my first semester of school sophomore year at the University of Illinois. I was nineteen years old. She was moving to Phoenix to live with my Aunt Rose and Uncle Pete. She was leaving for Arizona the day before I came home from taking my finals before Christmas.

I called her on a Wednesday; she was leaving Friday. I talked to her and swore up and down that I would go to Arizona the next summer. My friend Sheri was going to school there at Arizona State University, so now I had two excuses to make the trip. We said good-bye. I cried when I got off the phone with her; I didn't know why, but I thought that this may have been the last time I would talk to her. You know how easy it is to sometimes lose touch with family and friends when they move away. The next day my grandmother went into the hospital; she died two days later, the morning I finished my last final and drove back home to the Chicago area. My family didn't call me to let me know she was sick because they knew I had to be taking my finals anyway; there was no point in their opinion to tell me and give me so much pain when I was far away and there was nothing I could do about it.

That was when I had first decided to see Arizona. My grandmother wasn't there, but my friend Sheri went to Arizona State University, so I visited her when I was about to turn twenty. I hung out with her in the middle of June, when Phoenix reached a record high temperature - 122 degrees.

I remember the first day I was there I went to their pool to lay out and get some sun. As I was lying there I smelled a familiar smell, but it took me a few moments to place it. It was the smell from inside of a dry heat sauna. Mmm, burning flesh smell. I left after I smelled that in twenty minutes.

The rest of the trip, leaving the house went like this: open the front door, quickly lock it behind you, walk briskly to the car, get in as quickly as you can, leave the doors open while you start the car, and blast the air.

When I got back, I said that the “but it’s dry heat” argument is crap.

The first night I was there Sheri invited me out with two male friends to play pool. It wasn’t a date, mind you, we were just hanging out. So when we leave Sheri drives these two men back to their house, and since I was tired I stayed in the car while she walked in for a moment. I rolled my window down so I could feel the cool night air while I waited. They went in the house and I closed my eyes. I must have fallen asleep, but I have no idea for how long. The next thing I knew was that there was a man leaning in my window, leaning over trying to kiss me. It was one of Sheri’s friends. I jumped; I think I screamed. I swear, I gave him no signals. I had no idea where this came from. He acted like this was natural, so I asked him to get out of the window and I got out of the car. I went into the house and tried to hint to Sheri repeatedly that I wanted to go, but she didn’t quite get the hint. It was a miserable experience.

While I was visiting my friend Sheri on that trip I met a friend of hers, Blaine, who wasn’t irritating and all, and we got along well. We hit it off, and for the eight months or so after my first visit I visited Arizona when I could to see Blaine and Sheri. Since then Blaine and I have lost touch and Sheri moved back to the Chicago suburbs to marry her high school sweetheart.

But now that I’m here, a good deal north of Phoenix, all I can think is that it’s sure as Hell not 120 degrees. We’re on the north side, at a relatively high elevation again, and there’s snow everywhere. We’re in Williams, Arizona, just about 50 miles west of Flagstaff and 50 miles south of the Grand Canyon. We ate in this town at a Mexican restaurant called Pancho McGillicuddy’s. I swear, I can’t shake that name McGillicuddy’s.

And where we stayed, there’s a Jacuzzi. I feel the need to go over our hot tub ratings and update them. Please allow me to update the original list:

1st place: Days Inn, Torrey, Utah. Large hot tub, four dials for jets, and it was adjacent to the pool. Well ventilated. Nice temperature.

2nd place: Scott Basinger’s community hot tub, Pasadena, California. Outdoor. A little hot, but good breeze made it better. Nice view of mountains.

3rd place: Las Vegas Hilton, Las Vegas, Nevada. It would have ranked higher except for the arctic high-speed winds splashing water in our face. 30-foot wide hot tub had perfect jets. Nice view. Go there when the weather is better.

4th place: Steve Oster’s mom’s apartment hot tub, Henderson, Nevada. Good temperature. It was small, but there was a nice breeze. Good temperature. And it’s nice to be able to use a hot tub at midnight.

5th place: Travelodge Hotel hot tub in Williams, Arizona. Needs better ventilation in the room, but otherwise nice jets, good temperature. Not too big or too small. Two jet controls. Not bad.

6th place: Doug’s Place Hotel in Tropic, Utah. Simple hot tub, pre-made plastic model. Outside in the snow, which was interesting, but the water should have been

warmer.

7th place: Dave Adrian's apartment in Denver, Colorado. Sorry, Dave... The tiles were falling into the hot tub, the lack of ventilation burned my eyes and the water was too cold. Eugene and I guessed that if I sat in a bathtub and Eugene farted it might be better than Dave's hot tub.

Well, no. That would be worse.

Speaking of hot tubs, this one here in Williams closes at 9:30, so I'm going to go into the hot tub now before it closes.

February 16, 1998

11:23 p.m. Mountain Time

I'm in this hotel now and there's this dog show on (Eugene put it on) and there's this adorable mini Terrier (I think) trotting along. It was a little ball. Now there's a highland terrier, all black. His face is too skinny. All the lightweight dogs get picked up from the table and put onto the floor by their nape and tail. It's funny. This terrier is shaggy under the belly, so it's furry all the way to the ground and looks a bit like a mop. Other dogs are shaved in such strange ways. They had a puffy face, but a shaved top. One dog looks like a sheep.

When we were in the hot tub room we started singing "King of the Road" and the hotel manager came in and told us to please be quiet because it's late.

I didn't think we sang that poorly.

As soon as I started heading west I've had to start drinking a lot of water. Since Denver - Nevada and California and Arizona - I've had to drink lots of water. I came back from the hot tub and I drank three glasses of water.

February 18, 1998

1:05 a.m.

Yesterday, it was my parent's wedding anniversary. It's hard to keep these things in mind when you have no concept of what day of the week it is, much less what day of the month it is. I have to call them in the morning.

Went to the hot tub this morning before we headed out to see the Grand Canyon. Now, I was told by other people that Bryce Canyon was almost better than the Grand Canyon, so when I went there I was pretty much expecting to not be as excited about it as I have been about other national parks I have been to on this trip.

I was wrong. It was a cold morning, and snow set in so visibility was reduced after we were there a while, but it was beautiful. We drove up to the south rim and followed it east. It was pretty magnificent.

We drove to the Sunset Crater Volcano, which was less than an hour away from the Grand Canyon and checked out the large deposits of black lava all over the national forest.

We knew we wouldn't be able to camp so we found a place to stay on the edge of Arizona, before we crossed the border into New Mexico. We checked over our game plan and decided to visit Denver again for the weekend after leaving Albuquerque, and

then we could possibly head through Kansas and Oklahoma before moving in to Texas. We called Dave Adrian to confirm that would be okay.

Uh oh... This means he better get to work and having that Jacuzzi cleaned up.

Then we hung out in a bar for a bit and watched some classic Fox network television - like "Deadly Car Chases Three" and the like.

Then we got a cheap hotel and Eugene said he was going out for a beer and that he would be back at eleven.

He took the room key and my car, which had my luggage in it.

At ten minutes to one in the morning I was calling the police, asking if they pulled over a car with my license plate or if they had a record of any accidents.

As I was hanging up the phone I heard Eugene at the door.

He didn't crash. He was fine.

Oh, I love the consideration I get.

He swore up and down that he said he'd be back after eleven, not at eleven, and one in the morning was after eleven at night. That I shouldn't worry.

Well, I couldn't leave the hotel room, because he had my key. I couldn't change for bed, because he had my luggage. I couldn't go anywhere anyway, because he had my car.

Oh, what was I thinking...

Tomorrow we leave for New Mexico, for the poetry show I am going to be in there Thursday night. But not before I call my parents and wish them a happy belated anniversary.





# Chapter 13

## New Mexico

February 19, 1998

2:31 p.m.

As we crossed the border into New Mexico from Arizona, the Indian villages immediately disappeared. I noticed as we drove through the last miles of Arizona that there were trading posts and tons of places to purchase genuine Indian arts and crafts. When we entered New Mexico, the tee pees as well as the mountains disappeared.

Our destination was Albuquerque, home of the National Poetry Festival this week. I am performing in a show with five other Chicago writers tonight, and last night I got into town so that we could all get together and discuss the details of our show.

Well, then I found out that the last member of our show wouldn't be in town until today, just hours before the show, so it didn't really matter.

I found the bookstore we were supposed to meet at and found Krystal and Nina as well as Aaron, so we had two thirds of our show performers together. We tried to do a little discussing, and then an open mike started in the space we were in so we read to the group. Eugene took off with the car to drop our belongings off at the house we were staying at, so there would be room in the car to cart people around in.

Joel Matthews was letting all of the Chicago people stay at his place. The side door was perpetually open, since no one knew when one person or another would have to get in. He has a big dog, whose name escapes me, that wants to sniff you and play with you all the time.

It's a college abode. There are ashtrays filled to the rim with cigarette butts on every cocktail table. There's a light blue vinyl covered couch.

It's eclectic.

So we read at the open mike and tried a vain attempt to organize our stuff at Joel's and then we went to a café/bagel shop called Fred's Bread for a testosterone-filled all-

male poetry reading, where Aaron read as well. And for the first time in three and a half months, I wrote a poem.

I don't know; I just got tired of hearing all these whining poets talk about how their lives suck, and seeing them all drink to excess (even more than me, mind you), and then I started thinking about musicians like Kurt Cobain and Michael Hutchence (INXS) who killed themselves, apparently because being married and having infant children and being filthy rich and madly famous and adored by millions of fans is just too awful of a life.

And I hear all these songs about taking drugs to relive the stress or the boredom, and about people killing themselves, or bitching about how little their life matters.

So I wrote a poem, **True Happiness in the New Millennium** .

So after watching the male-fest at Fred's Bread we found Jason (the fifth member of the Chicago team) and made it back to Joel's house and attempted to discuss how we should do the show. Still missing the last performer, however, made us hold off on a schedule for our work. Then we headed to the main events for the evening: an evening of poets from around the country performing at a bar called The Launch Pad (which is where we're performing tonight, by the way).

Eugene was pleased that we were finally going to a bar.

So we watched performers read; some were blatantly racist and bothered me, some ranted on about depressing stuff too much, and one Lithuanian guy wrote short humorous pieces about being drunk of having sexually transmitted diseases or getting in trouble with the law. It was fun.

Jason wanted to stay for the second performance, which was starting after midnight, and since the rest of us had been inundated with poetry for over eight hours and were tired from traveling, we decided to go back to Joel's and get some sleep. Some of the performers were reading to a high school in the morning, so we needed our rest.

Eugene took my car without saying good-bye, or even asking if he could take it, to go to another bar for drinks. I was furious, once again, and everyone pretty much agreed that Eugene has to make sure that when he attempts to communicate something with me, he makes sure we're on the same wavelength.

Then we went to sleep. Then, at a time I can only estimate at three or four in the morning, Jason and Joel and twenty other people came in and started smoking and playing music and drinking and yelling.

While we were trying to sleep in the living room, on the couches.

Some of them tried to ignore us. Some of them were apparently so out of it that they probably didn't even notice us. Some of the people felt bad and eventually they moved the party to another place.

Jason left with them.

Jason had to read at the high school and leave before eight in the morning.

Krystal and Eugene and I were dying. We couldn't believe these people. I guess I'm too used to traveling around and I need more rest, but I don't know how you could be expected to perform two shows the next day, one at eight in the morning, when you sleep for two hours and get completely drunk in the process. Ah, the life of a poet.

So we managed to wake up this morning, despite our interruptions, and I went out and got my hair cut off. It falls above my chin. I needed to cut it all off - for the past month and a half I have been living out of a suitcase and my car, with barely any makeup, no bathroom to call my own, no hair style, and dirty jeans and sweatshirts to go hiking in.

I haven't felt very glamorous lately, in other words.

So I'm happy I got my hair cut.

Today we're going to go to a party hosted by Manic D. Press, a well-known label. Then there's another performance, but I think we're going to have to miss it in order to have some time to prepare for our show after Eric, the last person missing from our show, arrives from the airport.

Jason brought a digital video camera, and since I have room on my laptop computer we're going to try to make a computer video of our show.

And Eugene is trying to figure out how to make it to a bar so he could watch the Bulls game tonight.

Granted, there are only eighty basketball games a year, and there's only one opportunity to see me perform at a national show... But come on, it's the Bulls. How can I compete with that?

After all the time we've been stuck together, and all the times we've wanted to kill each other, I don't expect any more from him anymore.

Well, anyway, my point was that our group performance is tonight.

February 20, 1998

9:52 a.m.

I sold some of my books to a bookstore yesterday, got cash and a book on mythology in return. We watched a show at Fred's Bread again and then we all went back to the house to finish cleaning up our show. Jason had work to do, but we knew what he was reading so we pieces him in an printed out a copy of the show order for him



The six of us - Jason, Eric, Aaron, Nina, Krystal and myself - would each perform one poem, round-robin fashion, without introducing ourselves. Then in the second round, the performer before you would introduce you with a cute little biography. I asked Jason to introduce me, because I thought he had the best chance of getting it right, since he knew me. Then the third round of poems was not in an order, because everyone had a certain amount of time, not a certain number of poems (I had a few more poems, for example, because I chose shorter poems). We all sat on the floor at the back of the stage while one performer was at the front with the microphone.

The show before us was running late, so we started late. The show went well - there were no mishaps that the audience was aware of in our poetry (that's the nice thing about performing your own work - if you forget a line, you just ad lib it until you get back onto track).

The introductions that we gave each other, though, were entertaining. Most everyone read the biography for the person after them, because we didn't all know each other. Nina was busy eating an apple she used as a prop in her previous poem, so her introduction for Jason was poor at best. Jason pulled off mine, and I pulled off Eric's (I thought it would be nice not to mess up someone's introduction), but everyone else had to read bios off a scrap of paper, and Aaron even said, "I can't read your handwriting" about Nina's biography.

Actually, although unpolished, it was kind of funny.

I noticed Eugene taking pictures with my camera during the show, but I noticed that one he had his finger over the flash, and I noticed on a few other occasions the flash not even going off.

Well, we'll see what develops.

Oh, sorry, that was awful. Forgive me.

There was some real talent in our group. There were a few parts that didn't flow very well, but we were six different people who didn't know each other until four hours before the show, all performing in different styles.

After the show was over people kept coming up to us and congratulating us. Everyone seemed to like the show. Some people would come up to us and say things like, "Chicago poets ROCK!", which I thought was kind of funny.

After the show we went to a midnight reading of two female poets, but Eugene wasn't very up to it, and after a while, neither was I.

I'd had enough poetry for a while.

I know Krystal thought I was being kind of strange by not wanting to be around, because she hosts an open mike in Chicago and usually I'm always out performing in Chicago. But when I quit my job, a part of the reason why I wanted to travel was that I just needed to get away. I needed to get away from the unhealthy work environment I was in. I needed to get away from the weather. I needed to get away from the Chicago poetry scene, too - I needed to get away from all these people, including myself, showing off, looking for some glimpse of a spotlight. It got very old by the time I was leaving to travel. I had decided I didn't even want to read anymore.

People keep asking me while I'm on this trip, especially here, how my shows have been going on the road. I have to explain to them that this Chicago show I did last night has been and will be my only show during this entire trip. That I was taking this trip to travel, and experience new things, not stand in front of a microphone in assorted bars and read poetry.

This surprises people.

Either way, it was enjoyable to do the show last night, and it was nice to know that people liked hearing my work. Trying to get a bunch of drunk poets together to actually prepare for the show is another thing altogether.

I managed to get a bed to sleep in last night - Joel, then man who lives in the house we're staying at, was sleeping somewhere else last night, so I got to sleep in his bed. I even had a pillow.

And no Eugene.

He snores. Did I mention that?

So this morning I sit here typing again, and in an hour or so I'll wake Eugene up so we can pack the car and head back to Denver to visit Dave and Matt. Looking back, I really enjoyed being social with them. I look forward to seeing them again, to being able to just go out without having to schmooze with other nationally recognized poets, and without having to get on stage.

Actually, it's not the performing that bothers me, but the schmoozing. I guess it's nice to hear when someone I've never met before recognizes my name, but to me it all seems like we're playing little game, like we're a bunch of people in Hollywood trying to get our big break.

And sometimes it just seems silly.

All in all, New Mexico has a good alternative portion of town (although I can't honestly say if that's because of the people living here or the people who came into town for the National Poetry Festival). There are lots of coffee shops and independent bookstores and thrift stores. There are mountains on the horizon, although I can say they're not quite as impressive as Colorado's. The southwestern art is getting on my nerves, however... I'm a more modern-day artist and have never found more than a historical value in learning about the functionality of other cultures. (Most of the original artwork for Indian tribes around here decorated functional items.) Although there is a value in studying the past, the past is where it should remain in my opinion, and where some people wish to go back to their roots I prefer to look toward the future.

So yes, I do look forward to Denver. It will be good to laugh again.



# Chapter 14

## Colorado part two

February 22, 1998

11:47 p.m.

Well, it's Sunday, we're about to leave for Texas in a few hours... I've just been so busy being social that I haven't bothered to write. There's not much to say about Denver that I didn't mention before...



We drove in Friday afternoon and managed to go through rush hour traffic as well as experience two gapers delays in the expressways into Denver. As soon as we got into town Eugene decided he wanted to get Taco John's, and since I figured we'd be going there pretty much every day while he had the chance to get his favorite fast food, I told him to go on without me. Matt was working, so Dave and I hung out while Eugene satiated his very strange tastes.

We went out Friday night, but since we had been driving all day, we only got a beer at the PS Lounge before getting some beer and wine and deciding to go home to play pool and watch a movie. We watched "Blue Velvet" (I haven't seen that in a while, so it was fun), and we played pool for hours. Eugene was tired from the drive, so he went to sleep before we did.

In the morning Eugene and Matt overslept, so Dave and I went swimming. You have no idea how good it felt to be immersed in water again. I don't know what it is, but I have this love of large bodies of water. (Maybe my ranting about the hot tubs may have tipped you off to that fact, but you know...) I love watching the Gulf of Mexico

when I visit the beach near my parent's house. I love hanging out near Lake Michigan when I'm in Chicago. Whenever we've been climbing or hiking, I've always wanted to stop and enjoy the streams, the rivers, the dams, anything. And so far, this is only the second pool I've been in on this trip. It wasn't too cold; it was indoors, and it seems that no one ever used it.

Okay, that was a long tangent. Sorry. So as I was saying, Dave and I swam in the morning, then we woke everyone up and went out to breakfast. I decided to make the trip more interesting by drinking many cups of coffee (I don't usually drink coffee), so for the rest of the afternoon I was jumping around and acting a little like Beavis when he drinks too much caffeine on television.

So we decided to go to a few bars Saturday afternoon, because that seems to be what we do best. Well, Eugene and Dave had ulterior motives in going to bars - they wanted to play "Eleven UP" on Megatouch screens.

Allow me to explain.

Have you ever seen those smaller video games that sit on top of bars, which have mostly card games in them? Not full standing machines, but small television screens with things like video poker on them? Well, one of the games is called "Eleven UP," and the machine lays out a bunch of cards, and you have to remove the top cards when their numbers add up to eleven. Well, the first time we were in Denver Dave got Eugene hooked on this card game, and so they were at it again, trying to find these stupid machines to play their game.

So I broke down and played against Dave at this bar/cafe called "Netherworld," and I beat him. Actually, I just missed the high-score board.

I don't think he liked that.

So we hung out and played more games and then we decided to go to this bar we hadn't been to before, called "Gabor's." They were playing swing music, and at four in the afternoon there was a woman there dressed up in a floor-length red dress. Well, the highlight of our adventure there was that when Eugene went to the bar to order drinks, the Lady in Red started talking to him and offered to show him a few dance moves. Now, I'll preface this with saying that the Lady in Red was apparently drunk, and we could tell that she wasn't giving him much time to understand the moves before she was doing them. So we hear her say, as Eugene is trying to follow her lead, "Okay, now spin me... Okay, now cross your arms over your head... Keep holding my hands... Now put your foot back... Now dip me."

Well, it was about one nanosecond after the words "dip me" came out of her mouth when she was actually dropping herself to the ground, and I don't think Eugene had any idea that that was the Lady in Red's intention as she was giving him instructions, because he tried to hold her up, but she just fell right to the ground.

She got up and said sternly, "We'll try that one more time."

In explaining to us afterward what was going through his head, he gave us the quote of the day:

"I didn't think she was going to go down that far. I was like, 'Whoa.'"



Saturday night Eugene decided to drive to Boulder to see his friend Paul, and so I loaned him me car. Since I was then carless, Dave and I went out for Ethiopian dinner, then to the Purple Martini (remember the place Eugene complained to the bartenders at, because the dropping of the bottles into the trash can “startled” him?) to meet his friend.

I don't know his friend's name. His nickname is Snook.

I'm only guessing at the spelling.

Snook is a character. He seems to want to get into trouble. He told me that because he has a receding hairline he overcompensates for it by being overconfident.

At least that was his explanation.

How was he overconfident? Well, he tried to tell me, for example, that he has an average penis, you know, it's only eight inches long.

I thought it was best to just avoid that conversation altogether.

He gently pushed the back of a woman's leg who was standing near our table, just to see he have to react to her knee no longer being locked so that she won't fall over.

Snook is a character, as I said.

I could tell Dave didn't like the yuppie crowd, so we left and called it a night.

Well, I didn't like the yuppie crowd either, to be honest.

Sunday both Dave and I again got up before Matt, so we went swimming again. Eugene wasn't back, so Dave and Matt and I went out to breakfast and hung out for a while. When Eugene got back we all decided to go to Gabor's again and play pool, where Dave and Matt met a man (Shawn) who said that I looked like Dana Scully from the X Files.

I don't know what it is about Denver, but I should just place an ad somewhere that



states that no, I don't look like her.

Eugene tried to go to Taco John's once more Sunday night, but it was closed by the time he got there. So we ordered pizza and watched X Files. Eugene then decided to get a few hours of sleep before we left for Texas, since it would be a good long drive.

Which take me to now.

Well, really, the weekend was more interesting than that. I got to hang out more with Dave and Matt, which is always a treat. Matt is hysterically funny, and the more I talk to Dave the more I realize how alike we are

Oddly enough, that doesn't scare me. It's nice.

What I mean by that is that at times I think I'm the only person in the Universe who thinks the way I do about life, and people, and work. And I have to admit, sometimes over the weekend when Dave would say something, I would think, "Those words could have come out of my mouth."

And it's just nice to know that someone else out there sees the way the world could be.

So in a few hours we leave for Texas. That should be a fun drive. We leave at four in the morning. Eugene decided that a more efficient route would be to take smaller highways and not expressways, so we're not going to see Kansas or Oklahoma, like I thought we would.

Not like the view would be that phenomenal anyway, now that we're going to be east of the mountains again.

This should be fun.

By the way, Eugene tried to do his meowing cat trick with Kaiser and Soze again, but they seem to be on to him.



# Chapter 15

## Texas

February 24, 1998

7:38 p.m. Central Standard Time

Yesterday morning we left Denver at 4:30. I felt bad that we ended up waking Dave up. At one of the gas stations I rearranged some of the things in the back seat so that I would be able to lean my seat back a little and hopefully be able to sleep. At 7:30 we stopped for breakfast at McDonald's. Got two egg and cheese biscuits and a hash brown. Then we were on the road again.

We entered Texas at about 10:30 in the morning. We still had a good ten hours of driving to go. The mountains were now gone from our landscape; small oil pumps in the fields, rhythmically pumping back and forth, eventually replaced them. Almost as soon as we got into Texas, we noticed the signs for Propane. And we noticed that gas prices were a lot cheaper - less than a dollar a gallon. In fact, as we drove through some of the small towns in Texas on our way to Austin, we even saw middle-aged men standing in their driveways in groups with their beers in their hands and their pick-up trucks in the driveways.

The only thing that the show "King of the Hill" has wrong about Texas is that in the cartoon it doesn't look quite so poor.

I slept on and off throughout the day. I would get warm - it's actually warm for once on this trip - and as soon as I would fall asleep, Eugene would turn the air off, because it was cold. That would then wake me up, of course, so I would get up and turn on the air until I could fall back asleep again.

This cycle continued for about ten hours.

We stopped in some small bar about 30 miles outside of Austin to call Tony. Tony didn't get Eugene's message from the night before; the only attempt Eugene made to contact his friend before we appeared on his front door, asking for a place to stay for a few days. So he was unaware that we were in town.

“Hi, we’re a half hour away. Surprise. Can we stay with you?”

I guess it’s not just me that Eugene is inconsiderate to.

I drank a beer while Eugene talked to Tony on the phone, and I noticed that there was a basket of hard-boiled eggs on the bar. I don’t know if they were for sale or if they were just for bar patrons to pick up and eat. I picked one up; it wasn’t cold, so I set it back down.

I mean, what, were they out of pretzels?

So we arrived at Tony and Diana’s apartment at about 8:30 PM. They took us to a few bars, and to my amazement, there weren’t any hard-boiled eggs to be found. We noticed a t-shirt for sale at one of the bars that said, “Beauty is in the eye of the beer holder.” Eugene tried one bar microbrew and told us they should rename it “Rancid Pumpkin Brown Ale.” Apparently it wasn’t very good.

Today we woke up late and tried to find some stores in town to go to. No such luck. Now Tony and Diana are at swing dance lessons and Eugene went to play Ultimate, which is a glorified form of Frisbee. And I’m doing laundry.

Hopefully we’ll get up earlier tomorrow so we can see more of the town.

February 27, 1998

12:32 a.m.

Last night Eugene and I went out because no one else here wanted to. We went to the same area we went to the night before.

Now, I had noticed the first night we were out that there was a Louisiana-style Jazz bar, as well as a bar called Fat Tuesday and a bar called Tropical Isle, which is also located in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

What I didn’t realize, however, was that on this second night we were going out, it actually was Fat Tuesday only six hours away in New Orleans. I also didn’t realize that people living in Austin, Texas, took Mardi Gras so seriously.

We managed to park right off 6th street, but noticed that the streets were being blocked off and that police cars were stationed at each intersection. People were crowding into the streets. There was a fifty-foot line of people waiting to get into Fat Tuesday.

We walked down the street. There was a sex shop, selling toys and leather clothes - much like most of the sex shops in New Orleans. There were people on rooftops and balconies screaming at people in the street. Everyone was wearing plastic Mardi Gras beads. Some people even began to remove their clothes.

We first went to the Tropical Isle. I noticed that the Hand Grenade, their signature drink, was usually filled to the rim with ice, so I asked for mine without ice. It was much more of a bargain then. Eugene and I played a game of pool and listened to the cover band play “Blister in the Sun” and “Brown Eyed Girl” and “Melt With You” and other relatively innocuous pop tunes.

We walked to the next bar, but I still had my drink in my hand, so I got a slice of pizza from the fast food place next door while Eugene went in for another drink. A bouncer informed me that it was illegal to have open containers of alcohol in public. I had figured that since people were getting naked in the streets and doing other lewd

and illegal things, that it would probably be okay to have a mixed drink in the street too, but apparently I was wrong. Besides, I figured that the state that allowed concealed weapons would also avoid stringent liquor laws. Either way, I finished my drink with my pizza and joined Eugene in the second bar.

We sat outside, at the back of the bar on their patio, him drinking and me just looking at the sky. The weather was nice, but breezy, and the low clouds moved across the night sky with an alarming speed. Upon watching the sky, Eugene and I discussed what might happen if the planet instantly stopped spinning on its axis. After that discussion, we went to another bar, one with nice lights and a good band playing ambient music and a buffet table so I could get some broccoli in my system. Afterward, we thought we had enough of New Orleans, and decided to go home. This morning we slept late again. I've been working on a database idea in my spare time, while Eugene has been sleeping, usually. I'm trying to set up and implement ideas for a home business. It's nice to think about what I want to do beyond this trip.

We went shopping this afternoon, and did other menial things, like get an oil change and clean out my car. Eugene is going back home after this stop here in Austin; I head on to New Orleans to visit my sister tomorrow. Eugene is renting a car and driving back Friday to Chicago. Since he's going to have a rental car he is going to take a lot of the belongings we have collected along this trip, as well as all of his luggage and his sleeping bag.

He'll take his rock collection home with him too. I don't understand him. Most people collect souvenirs. I write down notes of my experiences. I take pictures. I even take matchbooks from places I've been. Eugene pulls over to the side of the road and collects rocks from the places he's driven past.

Sometimes I'm sure he values rocks and plants and animals more than human beings. I wonder what it's like, hating your own species so much.

It will be nice to have room in my car again.

After all of this time I have wanted to kill Eugene, I think now I've actually gotten to the point where I don't care anymore. Yes, I must admit that his dirty smelling cloths still irritate me, and that hacking sound he does every morning is still bothersome, but after all this time I've just decided to try not to let it bother me. Not that I want to continue dealing with it, mind you. I'm just trying to not let it bother me anymore. Biding my time, that's what you call it.

Tonight we all went out to dinner. They went out for bowling afterward.

I don't know what it is with me, but I just refuse to go bowling.

So now I've been watching some cable channel that has biographies about serial killers and landmark murder cases in the past few decades. It's interesting, hearing about Charles Manson. Or the guy that killed John Lennon. The guy that killed Lennon said he did it because he was nobody, and Lennon was the biggest somebody there was, and he didn't like being a nobody. And the thing is, I just watched a whole show about him, but I can't even remember his name.

Tony and Diana went to bed. I said good-bye to them, since I'll be leaving tomorrow while they're at work. Eugene keeps reading his road atlas. I don't think the roads

have changed since the last time he looked at the stupid map, but he feels the need to intensely study the pages of that book.

He has a thing for road maps, I think.

Tomorrow I pack up the car again, this time without Eugene's belongings, and leave him here in Austin and drive to Louisiana. It should be interesting, driving for long distances by myself. Having control over the radio for once. On the drive into Texas Eugene managed to find the song "Sweet Judy Blue Eyes" by Crosby, Stills and Nash three times. It will be nice to have the radio to myself.

My favorite pair of blue jeans, the pair I've been wearing the most on this trip (don't worry, I wash them), now has two small holes in the left knee. I wonder how much more destroyed they'll be by the end of this trip.

I guess I should go to bed.

So what have I learned on this first trip to Texas? That the gun shops are also the pawnshops. That gasoline is really cheap here. That there isn't a very good shopping district in Austin, and there's a lot of "Tex-Mex" food. That the weather is really nice. Really, really nice. That at times Austin thinks it's New Orleans. That there's too much country music. That Tony and Diana's cats, Mango and Grasshopper, can do the most amazing jumps and leaps for a toy made out of a two foot long stick with a few strands of multi-colored tinsel at the end. That even if Eugene says he'll do his laundry, don't take him seriously. That there really is an obsession with propane in Texas. That this state really is huge. And maybe that it's time to move on.

# Chapter 16

## Louisiana

February 26, 1998

10:44 a.m.

New Orleans is a strange place.

The first time I went to New Orleans was with Eugene. We decided to take the road trip, it was only twelve hours from Chicago. I was amazed at the bayou. I thought the swamps were cool, the water was cool. I thought the style of the small buildings in the French Quarter were cool. I thought the catacombs were cool (although these catacombs are above-ground cemeteries, not under ground, like the name implies - the cemeteries have to be above ground because of the amount of water in the ground).

I liked the lack of open-container laws as well.

A passenger in a car could have an open drink, just not the driver. So when we got in I cracked open the beer and Eugene drove. You could also walk around in the streets with open containers of liquor, as long as they weren't glass. So We'd wake up in the morning, open our beers, pour them into plastic cups and be on our way.

The first place we ever stayed at was a woman's apartment in the middle of the French Quarter that she rented out. She ran a bed and breakfast two miles outside the Quarter, and let us park our car there while we stayed at her apartment (parking is nearly impossible in the French Quarter - if you can help it, just don't bother driving in it).

Since that first trip I've been to New Orleans a number of times, a few times for work, to run the trade show that failed miserably in Las Vegas (and yes, it was a pretty big failure in New Orleans too), and a few times just to go for a weekend. Through work I met a chef named Mike Parr who has a balcony on Bourbon street, and every time we were there he'd invite us up. I've been there and met my friend Doug there. I most recently went to New Orleans to see Mardi Gras.

I had originally vowed not to ever go to Mardi Gras. I thought the city was fun

enough without this huge party there, there was room in the streets, and it wasn't a mob scene. I also didn't like the idea of paying an exorbitant price for a hotel room. I liked the idea of seeing the town without all the tourists in it - statistics report that New Orleans, with a population of one million, has about ten million in the city during Mardi Gras.

And I didn't like the idea of thousands of strangers cat calling me for show them my tits, either.

I hope you understand that reference, and that I don't have to explain it. If you don't, ask someone.

But this last year my friend Jocelyn was studying in New Orleans and I thought that maybe I'd use the opportunity to visit during Mardi Gras. Eugene thought it would be a good idea to drive there, and so we confirmed with Jocelyn and took off. Some of our mutual friends also visited, including Rachel and Diane. So all in all, there were nearly ten people sleeping on Jocelyn's floor.

During the days during Mardi Gras there are parades. Lots of parades. Usually about six a day, I think. The Friday we got there we took a nap in the afternoon since we had driven through the night to get there. I woke up to find a band from one of the parades banging their drums right in front of Jocelyn's house. The whole band was playing, and it barely woke me up. You could barely hear people talk in Jocelyn's house with the band playing right there, but we were so tired we almost slept through it. They dragged us off our blankets on the floor so we could go see the show. All the floats are constructed well, and they look like they're very sturdy, versus the flower-decorated floats you find at the average parade. These floats look like they're all made out of painted wood and paper maché sculptures. And they all have tons of beads in them. This is how you get beads, by standing on the parade routes and begging.

In the evenings, you head to the Quarter with your beads, ready to bargain for favors. This is how it works in New Orleans. Have good enough beads, and you can get people to get naked on the street for you. I called it a "prostitution-for-beads form of Capitalism."

Having my friend Mike was very handy during Mardi Gras. In order to avoid being stuck in the great mass of people walking down Bourbon Street, we were able to watch the show from his balcony. People were crammed into the street, from building to building. It looked like the crowd could carry you, there were so many people pressing against everyone.

And being on the balcony was a prime spot, because people looked up at you to take off your clothes.

As I said, it's a strange world.

Usually this system works only to men's advantage. They offer beads to women, usually on balconies, who will lift their shirt for men. Then the women get beads thrown at them. I decided that I had plenty of my own beads, though, so I called for men to drop their pants in order to get beads from me. You know, just to see if it would work.

Surprisingly enough, it did. Drunken men have no problem with dropping their



pants in public, at least at Mardi Gras. For some of the men, we had to throw beads at them to make them put their pants back on.

So this is my experience with New Orleans. There are a lot of little shops there, some are cheesy t-shirt shops, some are art galleries, some are sex shops, and some are 16th century antique stores. It's a town of money and debauchery.

Kind of like Vegas, but on a different scale.

On this trip, I'm meeting my sister Sandy in the Hotel Monteleone, which is a nice, old money, rich hotel in the French Quarter. I describe it as the hotel my boss would stay at when he came to New Orleans on a business trip. Sandy is in town for the weekend with her friend Sandy, a travel agent.

This should be fun, Sandy and Sandy.

I'm visiting them for the weekend, then I'm probably camping for a few days. I'm going to stay in Louisiana through the next weekend, for a few reasons:

1. I only have to be in Nashville by the end of the month, to meet up with some poetry friends of mine,
2. I haven't been able to get a hold of my friend Lisa in Tallahassee yet,
3. I don't want to stay more than two weeks with my parents and overstay my welcome,
4. My friend Dave Adrian (now nick named "Denver Dave") will be in New Orleans the next weekend, and I don't think I've mooched off of him enough on this cross-country trip, so I'll visit with him while he's in town.

After visiting my sister, it will be nice to have some time to myself and write on the laptop and read a few books.

Even if I have to camp.

And when Dave gets into town, I think he's going to bring his new lap top computer so he can write too.

When I was in Albuquerque, fellow poet Jason had his computer with him, and we matched in a completely retarded way when we were in cafes together.

So now it's Dave's turn to be a geek with me, I suppose.

Maybe we won't bring our computers out to the bars with us, though.

February 27, 1998

7:51 p.m.

Drove all day yesterday to get to New Orleans. I left just before noon. I usually don't drive long distances by myself; the eight hours this trip took was so far the longest. I was wondering how I'd hold up.

I drove to Houston and then toward the border. Surprisingly enough, I wasn't getting fed up after my usual four hours. And by five o'clock, I was crossing the border from Texas into Louisiana.

I was pretty excited to drive over a bridge; I have this thing for bridges. The bridge going over the Sabine River isn't particularly impressive on its own, but I love to look at the way bridges are built. I love the idea that someone created this structure so that now we could all drive over it without thinking twice about how difficult getting across the river

would be otherwise.

And I thought the change in the landscape when I crossed over that bridge from Texas into Louisiana was amazing.

It went from fields to swamps, instantly.

Ah, Louisiana. Bayou country.

Wanted to make up time on the road, because Sandy told me her and Sandy flew into the New Orleans airport at 6 in the evening, so to be at the hotel between seven and eight. I managed to make it into the French Quarter right at eight o'clock; I thought I was doing pretty good work.

Got into the hotel; Sandy and Sandy had not yet checked in. I managed to find a way to park my car in the hotel's garage without having to pay for it, so I parked. They still weren't in. So I walked out onto Bourbon street, only a block away, and went to my favorite place for carryout Hurricanes (that's the classic New Orleans drink - a rum-based drink that like fruit punch), at the annex of the Court of the Two Sisters. Frozen. So then I walked down the street to see if my friend Mike was on his balcony. He wasn't. At this point I figured they had to be back from the airport; even if their flight was an hour late they should have made it to the hotel by eight.

I walked back. No sign of them.

So I sat on the street side and started drinking.

When in New Orleans, I suppose.

After a while I was starting to get cold, because all I was wearing was a t-shirt and sweat shorts, so I went to the car in the garage and got put jeans on over my shorts and a jacket on over my t-shirt. While I was there, I grabbed the half-eaten bag of mesquite-barbeque potato chips I had eaten for dinner while I was on the road. Went back to the sidewalk and sat down and had dinner.

I figured people walking by me thought I was homeless. I thought that maybe if I had an empty cup next to me I could make some beer money.

At nine thirty Sandy and Sandy showed up. Apparently the plane taking off before them blew their tires and caused some pretty serious damage and was therefore stuck on the runway. So they were too.

The Hotel Monteleone is a nice hotel. The chandeliers in the lobby were gorgeous. I felt underdressed walking though the place. The room was nice; the bathroom is big and the room itself is pretty spacious. And considering that it's on Royal street, one block away from Bourbon street, I think it's a pretty good deal. As I said before, Sandy's friend Sandy is a travel agent.

We walked around the Quarter for a while, each of them getting a Court drink per my suggestion.

February 27, 1998

9:00 p.m.

I feel like rambling.

I'm trying to write, but I'm not really in the mood for it. Sandy's friend Sandy is strange. A neat freak. She thinks she knows everything about New Orleans because she

was here once 22 years ago. I found out they want me to pay a third of the hotel room, which is fair, but it's a chunk of change. I hate spending money now. It pisses me off. I might actually have to get a job in 1999. That sucks.

The weather here is nice. We went on a riverboat cruise today - I got a free ticket, and they had tickets. It was a two-hour ride. It was kind of cool. I love water. I have this thing for water. Can't explain it. There's a pool at my parent's house; I was a fish when I was a kid. Love lakes, love the ocean - even love streams. I want a fountain in my home one day. Just to hear the running water. I guess that also explains why I seem to be obsessed over hot tubs.

Eugene is gone. This fills me with a joy that I cannot explain on human terms. I have a whole month without him. I know, I know, he has a heart of gold and he's a good guy, but he has gotten so on my nerves. And patience is not one of my virtues. Actually, I don't think I'm happy primarily because Eugene is gone. I mean, I'm happy, but I don't think his leaving is the reason. I just feel like there's not much that is really wrong. Everything seems bearable. The fact that I have to shell out a lot of money for this hotel doesn't bother me too much even. I mean, what am I going to do about it?

There is a pool on the roof of the Monteleone. It has a very nice view, and even if it's cold at night the water is kept really warm and it's very nice. There's a row of evergreens or some type of bush, all in large terra cotta pots, all covered in white Italian Christmas lights. It's really pretty. And usually there are not many people there. I started looking for cheaper rooms for my second weekend here. I think every room near the French Quarter is going to be more expensive. This sucks. And there's no way I'm going to be so far away from the Quarter that we have to get a taxi. Might as well not bother then. So here's the deal: there's a hotel just outside the Quarter, right by the French Market, called the Frenchmen. It has a pool and hot tub, continental breakfasts and free parking for \$59 a night. The coupon says it has "old world charm." I'm trying to find a hotel with a pool and hot tub. The Landmark, in the Quarter, is also \$59, but has no pool. The other hotels in the Quarter are \$79. So I'm thinking I'll visit the Frenchmen (the hotel, not men that happen to be French) and check it out tomorrow.

My pair of jeans I've been wearing now has a big hole in the left knee. I've never worn a pair of jeans enough to wear holes in them.

Anyway, I left my shampoo and conditioner and body gel at Tony's apartment in Austin. I am so pissed about that, you have no idea. I liked that stuff, and now I'm going to have to go out and buy more stuff. That sucks. I don't know where I left it in Tony's apartment, but I don't have them with me. I hope Eugene saw them in the apartment and took them home with him. No, I'm sure he wouldn't notice that.

I've seen a few cool t-shirts while I've been here. None I would buy, but they still made me laugh. "Would you like a nice frosty mug of 'Get the Hell out?'" or "Hold my beer while I kiss your girlfriend." My favorite was a black t-shirt that had in tiny white letters on the chest, "Aren't you a nosy little fucker?" or something to that effect. I thought that shirt would be better though if it was on a long-sleeved black shirt that was tight on the chest and had it written right on the chest. I'd wear that.

I'm going to be camping from Monday through Wednesday. I'm planning on

spending three days doing nothing other than reading, writing and sleeping. Should be interesting.

I've been working on a database on my computer here for my business idea. It's dorky.

Macintosh computer users can name their hard drive. Well, the first computer I got, right out of college, I decided to call it Freedom. I wanted freedom from my family that I was then living with; I was now on my own and out of school; the computer was freeing me to do the work I wanted to do, and do it efficiently. Then when I got my first laptop I called it Freedom Two, because the portability of a laptop allowed me to do things I couldn't before. You're getting the idea... Then I sold my desktop computer and bought Freedom Three, my current computer, and this laptop I'm typing on now, that gives me the freedom to get on line while I'm on the road and such, is Freedom Four. My point? Well, there was no point. I just looked at my computer and saw "Freedom Four" and thought about how much the concept of freedom on one level or another means to me.

They're going to the Aquarium this weekend. I can go swimming again while they're gone, and hope that guy isn't there. Oh, wait, I didn't tell you that one. There was a guy leaving the pool as I was going there, but after seeing me he came back to the pool to swim some more. He kept trying to talk to me. I almost gave him a fake name. I also almost told him, "Look, I don't mean to be rude, but I came here to get some time alone." But I didn't. I just kept swimming away when he would swim up to me. I mean, he would swim right up to me when I wasn't looking and it would scare the crap out of me. Ugh. When I left he even took the elevator with me. Dork. His name was Shawn. Or else it was Sean. I didn't ask him how he spelled it. He was from Philadelphia.

It was so nice not having Eugene in the car while I drove. I could play tapes instead of listening to songs from the 1950s. It's aggravating having to listen to someone else's musical choices for so long. I think I'll have to kill someone the next time I'm forced to listen to a Crosby Stills and Nash song all the way through.

February 28, 1998

12:01 a.m.

Went to dinner by myself tonight, because Sandy the sister wasn't feeling well. Went to Old Dog New Trick, the only vegetarian restaurant in the French Quarter. Had the Tempeh Teriyaki with rice noodles. Tempeh is a soy derivative that has a nutty texture and flavor. It's sort of like eating a mushy garden burger.

But it's better than that. Really.

The Tempeh soaked up a little more teriyaki sauce than it probably should have and was a little spicy. But it was fine. It was nice to eat something that I normally don't get access to. Especially in the South.

So I'm sitting here in the hotel again. Sandy and Sandy had free drink passes at this revolving restaurant at the top floor of the World Trade Center, so I went with them and had a drink. Although the floor was moving incredibly slowly, I really did have a heightened awareness of the motion and it made me feel kind of dizzy. What do I need

to drink for, when I can find other ways to make myself dizzy?

Maybe, when I'm low on cash, I could just throw my arms out to my sides and spin around over and over again until I almost fall down.

But that would just be plain silly.

So now it's midnight and we're back. We didn't go to Bourbon street tonight. I'm with people who think that midnight is late.

Come to think of it, I'm beginning to think that midnight is late.

Sandy (the one I'm related to) has been looking for t-shirts for our nieces and nephews. She found one that was a rip-off South Park (the four kids from the cartoon were dressed in Mardi Gras colors, shouting, "Hey Mister, give us some beads!"), so Sandy (the sister) bought the shirt for Joel.

Kick ass... Found out I'm getting charged \$13 a night to keep my car in the Hotel Monteleone garage, when I was led to believe by the front desk person when I first came in that it was free for people who stayed in the hotel. That pisses me off. But I'm too much of a chicken to complain to the management that I was misled.

Sandy the sister reminded me today that last night we were all in bed laughing and giggling and acting like we were at a slumber party. We were complaining that the light seeped in from the hallway through the cracks of the door and the peepholes in the door (you see, there are two peep holes, one at eye level and one near the door handle for people who are confined to wheelchairs). I said that if you looked at it sideways, it looked like an alien face. Sandy laughed hysterically at that.

Really, it was funnier than it just sounded.

Sandy the sister seems to find all the old movies on cable and turns one on every time we are in the room. Grace Kelly, Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby are in the one that's on now. Before the guy from *It's a Wonderful Life* was in a movie, about Lindbergh's trans-Atlantic flight. What was his name? Jimmy Stewart.

Mary! Mary! That is all I think of when I think of Jimmy Stewart, the funny way he'd say his wife's name. That and his near neurotic repetition of the phrase "Zuzu's petals."

There was a band in Champaign that named themselves Zuzu's Petals.

I didn't know what that meant when I first heard the band name in Champaign; I never saw the whole movie through.

Then again, I haven't even read or seen the entire story for *Alice in Wonderland*.

What does this have to do with anything? Nothing, I guess.

Have I mentioned that we've seen a lot of tacky and sexually perverse merchandise on this trip? Mardi Gras beads that occasionally have beads interspersed in them that are shaped like boobs. T-shirts that say "Official Muff-Diving Instructor." Oh, and on the breasts theme, you can buy hats with boobs on them, t-shirts - you can even buy a fake pair of boobs that strap on around your back.

They're so realistic.

Once when I was in New Orleans I bought a gag gift for a male friend of mine. It was a pair of black bikini underwear, but at the waistline there was a small roll-up tape dispenser attached.

I thought it was funny.  
But I'm rambling. Apparently I need some sleep.

February 28, 1998  
10:32 a.m.

I tossed and turned all night. Couldn't seem to rest. At about four in the morning the people staying in the room next door came home. I think they might have gone to a wedding; I thought I heard them say something about a cash bar. They were very loud. Sandy the travel agent wore earplugs to sleep. I was afraid that I was going to kick Sandy the sister with all my tossing and turning.

Sandy the travel agent set the alarm for 7:30 so she could work out for an hour. Sandy the sister decided to join her and work out on the treadmill for forty minutes. I swam for a bit, but the morning air was cold so it wasn't as much fun as swimming at night. Besides, there were six or eight people there at the pool, and I couldn't enjoy the pool deck to myself.

And Shawn wasn't there. Just kidding.

So Sandy the sister and I went to breakfast while Sandy the travel agent showered. We ate a buffet that cost over \$11 per person. So I made sure I wouldn't have to eat for the rest of the day. I ate a mushroom omelette, hash browns, pancakes, fruit, and some bread... Was that all? I think so. I'm stuffed now.

Sandy and Sandy are gone now; they just left for a bus sight seeing tour of the city. Sandy the sister is really enjoying herself here. She's getting to learn a little more about the history of the city. She's enjoying these tours. Since I've been here five or six times, and since I've seen the plantations and above-ground cemeteries and the Garden district and the downtown area, the idea of a tour isn't so incredibly exciting. Besides, I've got my car and I'm going to be here for another eight days.

It's nice and quiet in the hotel room now. Sandy the sister doesn't seem to like silence and turns on the television once she's up. Sandy the travel agent - well - let's just say that she likes things exactly the way, well, that she likes them. She asks people at a restaurant to turn down the music, or turn down the air conditioning. Or to leave extra towels in the room. Or to bring extra hangers up to the room. She bought a shower sponge for the weekend, but cut it in half because it wasn't the right size. She makes sure that only sheets from the bed touch her, not the cover or blankets, because you know they don't wash them and you don't know what's on them. (Well, I suppose she's right on that one, but has anyone else ever thought of that before?)

Sandy the travel agent is a good mom. She brings food in her purse and an extra pair of sunglasses along with when you go sightseeing in case something happens and you need them. She's probably the type that keeps a \$20 bill in her bra in case of emergencies.

I have to go check out that hotel, the Frenchmen, for next weekend, and I have to find a cheaper parking garage to keep my car for the next tow days. This \$13 a day business just isn't right. Besides, if I stay in this room for too long, the maid service might not come and bring us more towels.

February 28, 1998

12:43 p.m.

Just walked to the Frenchmen. They're booked next weekend. Then I went to every other hotel I passed on my way back. All but one are booked. The one that isn't is only \$110 a night. That's for the small room.

Maybe I'll have to be outside the French Quarter after all.

It would save money to have a hotel and just pay to park the car near the Quarter every night.

Today when I take my car out of the lot, then I'll check into hotels outside the Quarter.

February 28, 1998

10:11 p.m.

We went to dinner. There was nothing vegetarian on the menu. I had to have them make something special up for me. The waiter acted like a surfer. Every he said was capped with "all right..." said like he was stoned. Sandy and Sandy were sure he was on drugs. I just thought he was slow and stupid.

I'm sitting here, and it's Saturday night, I'm in the hotel room Sandy and Sandy are in their beds now, and I'm in the biggest partying town in the United States and Sandy keeps asking me what's wrong. I'm with two people who don't want to drink. I'm waiting for Sandy the sister to suggest watching Saturday Night Live.

Only people with no social life watch Saturday Night Live.

I found out this afternoon that the reason why I feel like I have no cloths is because I left one load of laundry - SOMEHOW - in Austin. I'm missing a black pair of pants, a denim button-down shirt, all my black socks, a white button-down shirt, two swim-suits, my green Illinois sweatshirt, my cut-off blue sweat shorts, and I don't know what else. Add that to the shampoo, conditioner and body wash that I apparently left there, and that's got to be over a third of all of my essential belongings.

All of this time I thought I didn't have enough clothes. I wanted skirts. I wanted something other than what I had in my two small suitcases.

And now I have even less.

So let me think about this: I've had to pay a lot of money for this hotel. I have to pay \$52 for parking my car here. The restaurants cost more than I remember. And now I'm going to have to go to a thrift store to find something to wear for the last month of my trip.

Oh, by the way, I might get the hotel out of town that's only \$44 a night, if they have space when I attempt to check in Thursday. The coupon I have is not good on advance reservations.

I'm beginning to get angry.

Okay, I'm really angry. I'm losing my belongings, I'm losing my money, Sandy the sister complains about what few fashion choices I have - "Why don't you put a jacket on that?", or "why would you want to wear glasses like that? They do nothing for your

face.” And no one wants to go out.

What the Hell do you go to New Orleans for, anyway?

Sandy the travel agent is probably the pickiest woman I’ve met on this entire trip. We couldn’t eat outside on the balcony because she was cold. (It was nice out.)

I’m beginning to feel lonely. I start thinking about all of the things about people that I hate when I’m in a bad mood. Actually, I’ve managed to keep myself in a good mood most of this trip, despite the monetary setbacks. But today I just go angry. I was smacking my head, swearing to myself when I realized I was missing half of my clothes. I wonder if Eugene found my clothes and at least brought them back, but I don’t suspect he did. I even called him as well as Dave Adrian in Denver asking them to call the hotel (I even gave them the 800 number) to let me know what’s going on, and neither one of them has called.

I’m beginning to lose my mind. I want to pull my hair out.

So I’m using this space to vent.

Thank you, by the way, for letting me vent. No one else does.

They’re watching the Disney Channel now. It was Snow White playing. Now I don’t know what it is.

Although I don’t really want to go anywhere, I’m going stir crazy.

March 1, 1998

11:09 a.m.

I’m still dwelling over the fact that I just found out that half of my clothes are gone. I think my hiking boots are gone, too, so add that to my shampoo and other missing toiletries and that’s a lot to replace.

Okay, I’ve been in a bad mood because of all the money I’ve been having to spend that I didn’t anticipate, and I was aggravated enough that I only had these two small suitcases of clothes for a three month trip; now I only have half of those clothes for the last month of my trip. More money to spend; I’m going to try to find cheap thrift stores Monday.

I’m pulling my hair out.

I just finished washing some of my clothes in the bathroom sink.

With shower gel.

Got breakfast this morning at McDonald’s. I waited a long time in line; I saw the woman behind the counter mess up the orders of both of the people in front of me. Then I step up. “I’d like two egg and cheese biscuits, no meat.” She looked at me blankly. She didn’t know how to punch that into the computer; they don’t offer an egg and cheese biscuit without meat. She had to call over a manager to help her. Then she went to the cook’s counter and yelled that they needed to make a special order - “and egg and cheese biscuit.” I told her it was for two. She corrected herself. Then I ordered hash browns. Two. Then she told me to wait and took the next order. Then the chef in the back called out my order, but the woman behind the counter either ignored it or didn’t hear it. So there it sat. Then she finally got them and then put in one order of hash browns and gave me the bag. I told her I ordered two hash browns. She slowly



walked back to the fries counter and got another hash brown.

All in all, it probably took twenty minutes to get fast food.

Ignorance and incompetence disgust me.

Every hotel in the French Quarter is full but one for next weekend, one without parking or a pool or a hot tub the casts \$110 a night. So I found a coupon and checked out a Comfort Inn a few miles from the Quarter. They have parking, a pool and a hot tub, they even have a free shuttle to the Quarter for hotel guests. Not a fancy room or anything, but it's \$44 a night. With my coupon, though, I can't make reservations, so I'm going to just go there at 2:00 p.m. Thursday and hope they're not booked. They weren't booked Saturday; I checked out an empty room, so hopefully they'll have something this weekend. There are conventions every weekend this month, so hotels are hard to come by. I asked Eugene if there was any chance his hotel connection could get an employee rate for me at the Holiday Inn in the Quarter this weekend, but he never checks his e-mail, so he probably won't even get my message.

I try not to let the little things aggravate me, I've been not getting mad ever time I've heard I have to spend another \$50 here, I have tried not to get angry when the people I'm staying with turn in at 10:00 p.m. on a Saturday night, but now I don't even have enough clothes.

Sorry. I'm just fed up.

I've tried to not let the little things bother me, but now I just feel there are so many of them that I can't help but think about all the problems I'm having. Sure, people can say, well, at least you have your health, or at least you have the money to do this, or at least the clothes you have on you aren't you only clothes, but you know, those statements assume that I go by the standards others choose to live by, and I don't. I always ask for more, I always work for more, and I always expect more. And that's why it always seems like I'm fighting. But that's how I have to function, because I see no point existing if all I'm existing for is mediocrity.

While I was writing this morning someone must have pulled the emergency alarm in the hotel on my floor. Probably the foursome staying in the room next to us who has come back to their room and been loud every night this weekend at four in the morning. When Sandy the travel agent saw them and mentioned that they were being loud, one guy said that we'll probably be hearing the knocking of their headboard against the wall during the night.

Charming.

Well, as I said, I was writing in the hotel room, and suddenly there's a strobe light going off in my room and a loud siren starts ringing. So then a voice comes over the speaker and tells everyone to calmly take the stairs and evacuate the building. So I grabbed my purse and my computer (have to have your priorities straight) and walked to the lobby. A few people were walking down the stairs with me. When I saw that no one in the lobby was looking like they were evacuating, when I saw everyone calmly checking out and no one rushing outside the building, I turned around and took the elevator back up to the room.

People are jerks sometimes.

Is that supposed to be funny, pulling a fire alarm in a hotel? This isn't even like this is a party hotel or something, I mean, this is the Monteleone.

Sometimes I get so filled with hate. I hate the incompetence I see around me. I hate the fact that I have to deal with it. But when I make a mistake, then I'm that much more angry with myself, because I should have known better.

I'm probably not making any sense when I say this. It seems that no one understands how I think.

I see great potential in human kind, I see great achievements in the things we have done in the past, and I see amazing possibilities for the future. And then I see people who believe in fortunetellers and astrology. And then I see people who would rather be on welfare than make something of themselves. And then I see people taking whatever kind of drug happens to be available to them, not being concerned in the slightest about what's going to happen to them tomorrow. Then I see people fighting for more money when they haven't learned anything or gown to deserve it. Then I see people lie in order to make themselves look better.

These are the people all around me. These are the people that will affect every aspect of my life.

Sandy the sister was saying last night that it bothered her to think that some of the students she teaches, the ones who don't pay attention in class, the ones who act like they don't need an education, these people will be the ones building bridges for us to drive on.

I need to know that there is more than this. I need to know that there are people out there that care about life, that care about their life.

I need an oasis.

Sorry I'm going on like this.

I have no idea where I'm going to stay on Monday through Wednesday. I don't have a very good map of the state of Louisiana, but as far as I can tell there aren't many campgrounds.

It's cooler today in New Orleans. I'm sitting on the roof of the building now and my hands are getting cold. Sandy and Sandy are having brunch at the Court of the Two Sisters.

Too rich for my blood, so I passed.

I had to get out of the room though, so housekeeping could clean the room. We need more towels. And of course, I need shampoo.

Okay, enough of this. I've got to get myself in a better mood. There are two things I think of when I need to cheer myself up. One is a track on my Mom's Favorite Vase CD. One track is from when Brian H. and I were messing around with the microphones, and he didn't know I was taping him. He did this hysterical voice acting like he was a phone sex operator.

The other thing I think of is a photograph I have of my friend Brian T., when he was a freshman in high school. It's one of the goofiest photos I've ever seen. (Sorry, Brian, but you have to admit, it's pretty funny.)

So I'll think of those things now.

Sandy and Sandy just got back. They're getting ready to go to the flea market.

March 1, 1998

4:31 p.m.

Okay, I'm in a much better mood now. Went to the flea market, didn't buy anything. Hammered out a few details about next weekend - whether or not the hotel that was far away was okay or not, you know. Still don't know where I'm going to sleep tomorrow, but suddenly it doesn't seem like such a big deal.

Saw more interesting t-shirts.

I hate everybody - and you're next.

Don't sweat something petty - pet something sweaty.

Life is short - drink faster.

Sandy the sister was on a hunt for a sweatshirt, so we got to see many t-shirt phrases. I decided that a part of me for some reason wants to buy a black feather boa. They're only like \$8.00 or something.

Don't ask me why I want one.

They feel soft.

They're retarded looking.

I think I just described myself, not the feather boa.

Suddenly I feel like nothing is a big deal and I can handle anything.

Sandy and Sandy are going out to look for more stuff to buy. So once again I have the place to myself.

It's 5:03 now, and I just took a shower. Mmm... Much better. Tried to take a bath, but (1) there's no plug for the bottom of the tub, so I had to put a drinking glass upside-down on the drain, and (2) the metal thing at the side of the tub (that metal circle, you know, the one that usually has a lever for whether you want the bath tub faucet or the shower working) was leaking, so the tub drained until it was only about half full.

I'm too tall for bathtubs like that.

Hey, it just occurred to me that today is Sunday. That means... The X Files. I hope that for once the Sandy twins don't want to do anything. I could imagine that for once they'll actually want to go out and do something tonight.

Grr.

My socks and underwear and a shirt and shorts are hanging in my windows now, still drying from my washing them this morning. Ah, living a life of leisure...

Sandy the sister was asking me last night while we were standing in front of the St. Louis Cathedral waiting for Sandy the travel agent to get out of mass why I wanted to quit reading poetry. She said that the impression she got from my changing gears letters was that I never wanted to read again. And that's not the case, but some things for me need to change. Before, when I was getting shows in Chicago and reading at open mikes, I was going to over four open mikes a week, seeing the same people perform, and I felt like my work was stagnating. Then she mentioned my quitting, and I said that I had to do that because of the unhealthy work environment I was in. Besides, I was in the highest position I could have been at in that company, and I had learned

everything I could have at that point. In fact, the last year or year and a half of my career there was me fighting - not to get ahead, but to stay where I was, after I had repeatedly proven myself and knew I was best at the job.

And I couldn't stand letting incompetent people continue to try to take a piece of me any longer.

I had mentioned to Sandy the sister that I didn't like the attitude that most poets I see have - that they don't want to work for "the man," so they don't work hard at a career and give themselves any stability or security. She reminded me that I didn't want to work for the man, though, and I explained that it wasn't because of the work, and if I had an employer that didn't hate all of his employees I would have still been happy there. But now? Well, thanks to "that place" I gave four and a half of the best years of my life to (don't I sound like a divorced, bitter woman saying that?) and the people I had to deal with there, I don't want to have an employer. That since I have worked hard and have a savings I'd like to work on my own projects and work part time and just get by.

When I got my job, even at the low pay they were giving me (less than half of what I ended up making there), I was able to live in a small apartment and stay out of debt. For that matter, I lived without a budget. If I could have lived without a budget then, with what I was making, I think I could work part time, work on my own business and live reasonably (hey, I'm not even buying suits for work or eating meat or going to the bars as much as I used to, so I could save money there) on a budget.

And maybe I'll have a little money left over after traveling in case I need it, too. Or maybe my business ideas in publishing will make me a book-publishing mogul and I'll be able to retire before I'm thirty.

Like I'd do that.

I keep thinking about how a part of me misses my home; the comforts of being able to cook a meal and the like. I think after doing all of this traveling I will look forward to having a home back.

Even if it is an 800-square-foot garden apartment with a leak in the bathroom. Well, maybe my next home won't be that bad.

It's now 6:55 p.m., Sandy the travel agent went to the bathroom again. Did I mention that she seems to have to go to the bathroom a lot more than the rest of us? She always has to stop wherever we are because "she has to go pee."

I was taking Sandy the sister's suggestion to iron my clothes that I hand-washed this morning in order to dry them faster.

Everything is still wet, after twenty minutes of ironing. So I'm going to revert back to the air-drying method.

March 1, 1998

11:27 p.m.

Had a fun evening, considering all that went wrong.

First we went to TGI Fridays for dinner, since it was just a block away and we knew they had vegetarian options. Sandy and Sandy started complaining about their last waitress there; they were sure she was high. I told them they think every person that

serves them a meal is high. Todd, from now on referred to as “Hot Toddy,” was our server for the evening, which was excruciatingly long.

Allow me to explain.

First of all, Sandy and Sandy ordered small meals, where the salad came with the meal, but I ordered a meal with a separate salad. After getting our drinks, Sandy the travel agent got her soup, but I didn't get my salad. Sandy the travel agent had to ask for our silverware, which we didn't get yet. Hot Toddy told us that they were out of silverware, and that as soon as they finish going through the washer we can have some.

I didn't think much of the fact that I didn't get my salad until we realized that our waiter disappeared. Sandy the sister guessed that he was washing dishes. I had to go to the bar to get a refill for my water. Twice. Then Hot Toddy came back, and Sandy the travel agent asked for an iced tea refill. He told her that he couldn't do it right away because they were out of iced tea, but as soon as more was brewed he'd get her some. As he said this, another waiter walked behind him with two tall glasses of iced tea for another table.

In fact, the other waiter in the room was walking around a lot, taking care of his customers, the way Hot Toddy should have been doing, but after Sandy the travel agent asked for iced tea Hot Toddy was nowhere to be found. The table next to us received their meal, without their salads, of course, and I was still waiting for my salad and had to go to the bar for refills. The other waiter for the room eventually came to our table and asked us how we were doing. As soon as he did, all three of us started talking at once, saying what was wrong.

“I have had to go to the bar for refills for my drink.”

“Our waiter has been missing for twenty minutes.”

“I'm supposed to get a salad before my meal and I haven't gotten it yet.”

“I've waited so long for my salad and potato that I don't even want it.”

“I asked for an iced tea and I haven't received it.”

“Can you get the manager for us?”

The other waiter had someone bring Sandy the travel agent's iced tea to her. They walked up to the table, looked at the two drink glasses in front of Sandy the sister's and my place setting, and then they asked, “Who gets the iced tea?”

After they left, the guy at the table next to us said, “Maybe the person without the drink gets the iced tea.”

We noticed that the salads eventually came for the table next to us. We also noticed that they took the heart of a head of lettuce to make the salads. They looked like pieces of artichoke, they were so yellow and compacted. Soon after the manager came. She tried to be nice, but we complained about the service at our table and the food at the next table. Sandy the travel agent said she didn't even want her meal. The manager told us that the reason why we haven't seen Hot Toddy is because he is in the back - washing dishes.

She said she'd take care of it for us.

Then our food came. Sandy the travel agent watched Sandy the sister and I eat our food. I of course didn't get my salad, but Sandy did. Then I got another refill. I didn't even bother waiting for Hot Toddy anymore.

We listened to the people at the next table, who also had Hot Toddy for a waiter. Everyone had their food at the table except for one guy. Then Hot Toddy finally emerged from the depths of the kitchen and actually asked the table after being stopped, "Can I help you?"

The guy without food pointed at the void in front of him on the table and asked, "Do you see something missing here?"

At this point the Sandys and I were laughing out loud. We couldn't help it.

We figured that at that point the wait staff was entirely too scared to come to our section of the restaurant, because we were either bitching constantly or maniacally laughing.

We saw people wait for their meal most of the time we were there. We saw some people wait for twenty minutes for Hot Toddy to come pick up their check, which he never did.

At one point, the hostess (whom we called "Miss Happy," because she was the most depressing looking woman we had seen in a long while) was missing, and as we were looking for Hot Toddy we noticed he was seating people.

Hostess, waiter and wash boy.

To make a long story short, we were at the restaurant for over an hour and a half. We got our food comped.

Then we ran out of there.

Then we went down toward Decatur street and ordered frozen drinks and walked down by Jackson Square to enjoy the view. We saw someone doing some sort of performance, so we walked down to see what it was. It was a man with cardboard canvasses and a crate of spray paint cans. With a few templates, some smudging and fire, he created these sci-fi landscape paintings that looked like printed posters. They were incredibly intricate and detailed that it was absolutely amazing. He was selling the paintings for \$20 each. There was a wait for his paintings.

We walked over to Cafe du Monde and Sandy and Sandy had a few more beignets, then we went back to the spray paint painter. Sandy the sister didn't notice the incense burning, so she asked what the smell was. I told her it was my breath. She looked at me. I told her I had patchouli breath. She laughed.

After listening to the music coming out of the boom box the painter had, Sandy the travel agent decided she needed to buy "Return to Innocence" by Enigma.

So then we went home, and here we are. I packed my bags, except for my still wet clothes hanging in the window sills and over the shower curtain rod and my remaining toiletries. I have also realized that I left my favorite black and white polyester polka-dot long-sleeved shirt in Austin, the one that used to be my dad's.

I looked so cool in that shirt.

I hope Eugene brought those clothes home with him.

In the morning we leave - early. Sandy and Sandy's flight is at something like ten in the morning, so they have to be out of here by 8:30. So I get on line at dawn and check in one more time before I travel off on my own for a few days.

# Chapter 17

## David Jarvie



This is my chance to come clean.

David Jarvie started working at my company the week of July 4th, 1996. Dave Seng and I hired him as a designer. In the first month of him working there he fit in very well, he got along with everyone. When we had to stay late nights in the office working he was fun to be around. Everyone liked Dave Jarvie.

At the time I was finishing my short-lived career as a singer with the band Mom's Favorite Vase (named from the Brady Bunch episode where the kids were told not to play ball in the house but they did and broke... Mom's Favorite Vase), and we were having a good-bye party on August 3rd at Baxter's Gin Mill in Chicago. Brian Hosey, my friend from high school, and Warren Peterson, the husband of my life-long friend Sheri, and I were going to play music live one last time and invite our friends.

I told everyone at work to come to my show.

Dave Seng swore that he would come, since he had never been to any of my shows, even though he and Doug Elwell (another friend from work) were moving that weekend. Dave Jarvie told me he'd make it too.

A lot of my friends made it. Sara and Carol were there; at one point they wanted us to play "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor, and Brian started playing it on the spot and made me sing it (it's a little high for me). But everyone seemed to like it.

Dave Jarvie said it was his favorite song of the night.

I was really surprised to see Dave Seng and Doug Elwell. I didn't think they'd have the time to come to my show; they were moving into an apartment about an hour away. They were still wearing their moving clothes. Dave Jarvie hung out with them at the bar. He was wearing torn blue jeans and a white t-shirt. When he saw me he told me he noticed that I was wearing mascara.

Most men don't even know what mascara is. He bothered to notice that I made a

point to wear make-up.

He told me I looked nice. I was flattered.

Later in the evening, he asked me if I would like to go to dinner. I immediately stopped. Was this a date? He looked at me, seeing my confusion, and said yes, he was asking me out on a date. I told him flat out that I didn't want to date people that I worked with. It wasn't him; I just didn't want to deal with the gossip and the difficulties that would surround two people who work together dating each other. He said he thought of that as well, but he couldn't get around the fact that he liked me. So he thought it was worth the effort. So he asked.

I felt terrible. I didn't want to turn him down, but I didn't want to get into something that could only lead to trouble. He ended up leaving, and I followed him outside to talk to him. I think we sat in his car and talked for an hour. I wanted him to know why I was doing this. I didn't want him to feel bad.

And I didn't want him to leave.

He said he was going to a street fair the next weekend. I was going too, so I met up with him and we went together. I did like him. I told him I liked hanging out with him as friends. He told me he liked it too and that he wouldn't expect any more of a relationship unless I specifically told him that was what I wanted. He had asked me about renting a movie and watching it at his apartment. I told him that would be fine.

So Saturday night, August 10th, I went to Dave's apartment and watched "Pulp Fiction." His roommate owned a nice town home in Lincoln Park; he had a 72" television set and a huge l-shaped fluffy ivory couch in his living room. Dave and I sat on opposite ends of the couch.

I decided I couldn't take this any more, but I didn't know what to do. Finally, as he came back from getting another glass of water for me during a break in the movie, I said, "Could you do me one more favor?"

He asked, "What?"

I said, "Could you sit a little closer?"

He looked shocked, a little confused. I paused. "To me?"

He sat down next to me and put his arm around me.

Thus our relationship began.

We didn't tell anyone at work. We knew the gossip would be too much. They saw us hanging out every day for lunch and decided to gossip about us anyway. (Did they really have that much time on their hands?) All I could think was that if they made our lives this difficult, without knowing that we were even dating, imagine how obnoxious they would be if they did know. So we kept quiet. I told Dave Seng about it, so that he would know that I wasn't keeping anything from him. If I had to do evaluations of Dave Jarvie, or if I had to work with Dave, I wanted Dave Seng to know that I wasn't hiding anything and trying to give Dave Jarvie preferential treatment.

And I didn't. If anything, I was harder on Dave Jarvie in the office than anyone else.

We continued dating. I visited his family for Christmas. Dave told me about how he never had long-term relationships and that this was strange for him. And then he would shy away from me. I told him he had some issues he needed to get over. I'd keep trying to



make the relationship work, and he would continually push me away, the pull me back.

He told me he loved me. And that scared him.

We celebrated our birthdays together, his in May and mine in June. He painted a portrait of me for my birthday. It's hanging in my bedroom now.

He was frustrated with his job, more so than I was. I tried to be the voice of reason: Dave, you should keep your job for over a year or it will look bad on your resume. Dave, this is a good-paying job and you should keep it. Dave, it's hard to get a job in publishing and design, even if this is a hard place to work for.

These were the arguments I used to keep myself from quitting.

But Dave Jarvie didn't want to be in publishing. He wanted to be working for an ad agency, where he had a month to work out a concept for a one-page ad, instead of working for a publishing company, where he had less than a week to design an entire magazine.

But he stayed.

And throughout our relationship, women from work would hit on him. And he told me all about it.

After a few months, he decided he wanted a real commitment with me. It had been over a year of us dating exclusively. At this point I was fed up with the number of times he had pushed me away. I felt like Dave Jarvie was now the boy crying wolf, and I didn't want to listen anymore. We still dated, but this time I was the more distant partner in the relationship.

Then I decided I needed a change. This was when I started working on plans to quit my job. I decided I didn't even want another job; I wanted to get away and travel. Work had become too difficult, not because of the work but because of the people there who chose to make work difficult. Dave Jarvie was the only one at work I could talk to about this. He wholly supported my decision to leave.

He teased me that I made him stay, but he still supported me to leave.

We made plans together. He was planning on visiting his family with his brother in Scotland during the summer of 1998; he invited me to join him. This was one of the main reasons why I decided to leave. I wanted to travel around the country, but I was looking forward to going to Europe, and I had definite plans to be in Scotland.

He started another painting of me. He told me he didn't like the portrait of me that he had done for my birthday; he wanted to do another painting of me, more in his own style. He started it; he drew in the figure of what looked like a dancing woman; then he painted the background in sweeping shades of red.

Then he stopped.

The painting sat with a few other canvasses in the corner of his room. I always teased him about it; I wanted to see the painting. I was thrilled that he was painting another painting of me. I told him I wanted to see it done. He was making it for me, but I teased him, asking, "When are you going to finish that painting, so I can have it?"

He teased me right back about it, saying, "Can't I have any of my own paintings?"

I put in my two-week notice. Dave Jarvie was the only one in the office who knew I was doing it. After my last day of work (Halloween 1997) I took a month off and visited my family. We stayed in contact through phone calls to his office and through an

e-mail account that I had loaned him. When I got back from Florida in December we spent more time together. We didn't want to be boyfriend and girlfriend when I was leaving to travel around the country; I didn't want him to feel like he had to wait around for me. He didn't want me to leave.

So I started on this road trip. He agreed to watch over my apartment while we were gone, until Eugene got back. He checked on my mail, watered the plants and took care of Eugene's cat (which he constantly complained about). We e-mailed each other, even though he didn't like typing; he thought it was impersonal. I called him at work when I could. He left his job by the time I was in Utah, though, so I was only able to leave him messages at his voice mail until they changed his voice mail box and gave it to someone else. We talked on the phone when he was at home.

Since Eugene was coming home, I told Dave that he didn't have to worry about the apartment anymore. And I thanked him profusely. He told me that the only place he could check his e-mail account was at the computer in my apartment, so since he wasn't checking on my apartment any more I could have the account back.

He finished the painting of me last Saturday.

March 3, 1998

10:17 a.m.

Just received two e-mail messages that something was urgent, and that I needed to call home. The messages weren't from Sandy or other relatives; they were from Eugene and my friend Brian, who was my friend from college and Dave Jarvie's roommate. I left a message for Eugene to call me. I figured it was about Dave, because Brian is a friend of Dave's. I assumed the worst and called Noreen's apartment, the number Brian left me.

Many thoughts went through my head. Dave is diabetic, the serious kind, he takes three shots a day. He drinks too much. He could be in the hospital right now. He could have passed away.

Or something could be wrong that isn't even related to the diabetes. He could have been hit by a car. He could have tried to commit suicide.

Noreen's roommate answered the phone. Noreen wasn't there. I told her that my name was Janet, that I was a friend of Brian's, and that he said there was an urgent message for me. She knew what I was talking about. I asked her if she knew what the news was. She said she did. I asked her if it was about Dave. She said it was. I told her I was prepared for the worst and would she please tell me.

She did.

She didn't tell me much. I didn't think to ask questions. Dave Jarvie had a reaction related to his diabetes and passed away.

I dated him. We worked together. We remained friends.

He told me he loved me.

I didn't know exactly what happened. I don't know exactly when it happened. I didn't think to ask. All I could do was make every effort to stop myself from sobbing while I was on the phone with a woman I didn't know.

She kept apologizing for being the one to have to tell me. I told her it was okay and that I wanted to know.

I left my number for Brian with her. Then I called him at work and left a message.

Over the course of today, in the few hours I have known about this, I have talked to Noreen, Brian, Dave Jarvie's family and a few people from work - Alison, Dave Seng, Doug and Brandon. People at work (other than Dave Seng) didn't even know for sure that Dave Jarvie and I dated. They didn't know that Dave Jarvie loved me. They didn't know.

I haven't been able to stop crying. I'm alone in Louisiana. I'm waiting in this hotel room for another few days, by myself, until Dave Adrian comes into town. I feel like this hotel room is a jail. Two double beds. One television set. A bathroom. A small desk.

I feel like I'm in prison.

I want to wait here to see if anyone calls me back. Dave Seng at work has a message from me. I called Dave Adrian to talk to him about the possibility of him rearranging his flight so I could make it up for the visitation, Thursday in Detroit.

I'm writing this not to inform you, but to stop myself from crying. If I focus on something, maybe the tears will stop.

I see the sun outside and think that this is a day that Dave won't see.

He was thirty. In May he would be 31. May 15th.

Last year for his birthday I took him out to his favorite restaurant for dinner, Bossa Nova. Bossa Nova is closed now.

We had dinner, and I gave him his present. It was a leather wallet - yes, I even bought leather for him, Janet, the vegetarian - and had the outside embossed with a quote from the movie "Pulp Fiction." He said he always wanted a wallet with this certain inscription on it. So I got it for him.

The inscription included a swear word. Even still, I went to the old man behind the counter and asked him to emboss it on the wallet.

After dinner I took him to a bar in his neighborhood and told him I wanted him to be able to see the Red Wings game, since he was a big hockey fan and seldom got the chance to see their games, and missed seeing his hometown team play. He thought that was the sweetest thing, that I would remember that there was a Detroit game and take him to a bar to see it. But what he didn't know was that I called up some of his friends to celebrate his birthday and about six of eight of his buddies from Michigan were waiting at the bar for him so they could all watch the game together.

I think he was happy that I got his friends together.

I'm trying to figure out if I should go to the visitation. In order to get back to New Orleans when I'm supposed to be here I would only be able to be in Detroit for two hours and forty minutes, and the Funeral Home is a good 45 minute drive from the airport, leaving me about an hour to spend in town. I'm also trying to figure out if I want to see him that way; I'm trying to figure out if I need a chance to say good bye to him or if seeing him during visitation would only remind me of him being gone. I don't want to think of him in a coffin when I think of him. I don't want to see the suit they picked out for him and think that he's worn that suit when we've gone out, or that he's

wearing the tie that I always complained about, the one with the little characters of women in dresses with hair that stuck out.

I always teased him when he wore that tie.

I saw my grandfather at his wake, and that is the only way I remember him.

I wanted to be able to go to my grandmother's wake, but I was out of town. At the time I was devastated. But now I'm fine with it; I didn't need to see her that way.

I've been on the phone most of the day. I've talked to Brian twice now; I've talked to Dave's brother Steve twice about trying to get there. I think they understand if I can't make it. I talked to Alison at work. I couldn't stop crying. I talked to Brandon and Doug and Dave Seng at work. I wanted to talk to Dave Seng because he knew we dated, but he didn't know for how long or what kind of relationship we had.

He didn't know that when I was back in Chicago in December Dave and I still went out; we went to dinners, we rented movies. When he was sick I made him soup and tea and got him water and made him rest on my couch. I made sure his blankets were always on him and I made him a little footbath so he could have his feet in warm water. The weekend before I left he took me out to dinner downtown and we took a carriage ride. We went to the 95th in the John Hancock building for dinner at the end of October. He told me that if he didn't get the chance to see me for a month, since I was traveling, he could spend all of the money he would normally spend on seeing me in one night.

At least I have these memories.

For the past two years we walked around at Christmas time along Michigan Avenue to see the lights and the windows.

Dave and I made a weekly date to watch *The X Files* in his room at his apartment. His roommates would usually want to watch something else, or would be doing something in the living room, so we'd sit in his little bedroom and watch television by ourselves. We'd make drinks and sit on his bed in the dark and watch shows. He bought a set of martini glasses and a shaker for me and he would make me cosmopolitans. He had a tiny room. He had my old twin bed pressed against the opposite wall of his television set. When I bought my new bed I loaned him my old one. He didn't use the frame; he put it in storage and just put the bed on the floor. He'd make me cosmopolitans and I'd drink out of the martini glasses he bought for me. And we'd watch television.

Actually, I can do a visual scan of his room in my head now. He bought the martini glasses and shaker for us and they are sitting on his dresser. His unfinished paintings are propped against the wall, at the foot of his bed. I would borrow paintings of his from time to time so I could hang them up in the back room of my apartment. I can see the extra sinus pills and prescription medication and Humilin and Insulin and syringes on his nightstand next to his bed.

One of the paintings that wasn't finished was a painting he was doing of me. It looked like the silhouette of a woman dancing. All he did was the background - it was in many shades of red. The body wasn't painted, only lightly drawn in. You could see the canvas in the figure of the woman, in my figure. I always teased him about the painting; I wanted to see it done. I wanted the painting. I thought it was the most wonderful thing that he would want to paint a painting of me. It was an honor.

Brian and Noreen told me that Saturday he finished that painting.

He went out with Brandon Friday night, and Saturday spent the day finishing the painting of me. Brian and Noreen came home Saturday night at about midnight; Dave asked Brian if he wanted to go to Lange's the corner bar. Brian went out with Dave. They had two beers. They came home at two in the morning.

Brian's sister was visiting, so Brian slept on the couch. The next afternoon Brian thought Dave was asleep for too long. He opened the door. He found him on the floor.

Brian's sister checked for a pulse.

I think I would have fallen apart if I had to see Dave like that.

I keep thinking about that now - having to see him that way.

Noreen told me that everyone showed up at the apartment - the police, the paramedics, the coroner. When someone that young dies, they want to find out why.

The autopsy isn't back yet. Steve, Dave's brother, used the words "diabetic reaction." Brian used the words "diabetic coma."

This is all I know.

This is the man I've been dating for the past year, year and a half, and this is all I know.

I'm sitting here, on the other side of the country, in a hotel room by myself, and this is all I know.

I miss him. I miss him dearly. This is all I know.

Dave was the only person at my office who knew I was planning on quitting. He knew the day. He sent me roses at the office the day I put my notice in. Someone delivered them into my room while I was telling Dave Seng that I quit. It was perfect timing. He bought himself a pair of champagne glasses like the ones he bought me for when I put in my two-week notice at work. They sat on the second to bottom shelf on his bookshelf. They were from Crate and Barrel; they had a gold streak spiraling around the glass. I think of the freedom and happiness I felt on the day I put in my two-week notice; Dave brought two bottles of champagne and these glasses to the office and I celebrated with my designers in the department at 10:30 in the morning.

Dave and I drank out of the two champagne glasses. Everyone else used their coffee mugs and plastic soda glasses.

He played "Freedom 90" By George Michael. It was hysterical.

He made that day great for me.

After that day, he bought a pair of glasses like that for himself. I told him that he didn't have to buy a separate pair, that he could borrow mine whenever he wanted; I thought of them as ours anyway.

He always spent money freely. I told him to save for when he got older.

I have a pair of wine glasses in my apartment from when we took a small trip together. I buy wine and champagne glasses from different places, ones that are very unique, so that I can remember occasions and people. I have this pair of wine glasses for Dave. I even had written in my will that if I died he was to receive those wine glasses and the gold-streaked champagne glasses.

And his portrait of me.

I never expected this.

I just called my sister. I needed someone to talk to. Eugene told Sandy the news last night, so she was in a way waiting to hear from me. I feel like I've been on the phone all day.

I've needed people to talk to.

It's too unfair. I can't stop myself from crying.

He never took care of himself. His diabetes was severe. His brother told me that at least Dave didn't go through the advanced stages of diabetes - losing his circulation, having his feet or legs amputated, being confined to a wheel chair, or losing his vision.

Dave would tell me periodically that he couldn't feel his feet. His circulation was already going. I would rub his feet for him. He said it helped.

I can remember now sitting on my couch, telling him to stretch out on my couch, and I would rub his feet. He'd be worried that his feet smelled. I told him they were fine.

I told him to change his diet, to eat more hot and spicy food, because capsaicin, the stuff that makes hot peppers hot, was supposed to help with circulation. When he ate it, he said that he could tell the difference.

Dave wore thick glasses. He already had poor vision. He was also losing the ability to differentiate colors. I would come into work in a new business suit, and he would say, "Hey, that's a nice black suit." I would look at him and tell him it was green.

He wouldn't believe me. I'd ask Joe Dandridge, a coworker. He'd confirm it was green.

He was slowly going colorblind. It was a constant reminder to me that he was getting worse.

Sometimes I would see Dave and he would look unhappy. I'd ask him what was wrong and he'd say he felt a little dizzy. He'd try to sit down. He would be very pale. I'd touch his forehead. He'd be cold. I'd grab his arm, to steady him, and he'd be sweating profusely. And I didn't know enough about diabetes to know if this was happening because he had too much or too little insulin in his system. Then he'd pop a few Life Savers into his mouth and tell me that he needed to get food right away.

Butterscotch. He always had a reserve of Life Savers Butterscotch candies.

We'd go out for breakfast, usually to Nookie's, and he would order two meals. He'd be starving. Then the food would come, and he'd eat half of one plate and decide he couldn't have another bite.

I remember once that we went to the Beaumont for breakfast, just down the street from Nookie's, because they had an all-you-can-eat breakfast, and they also had make-your-own bloody marys for only \$2.00 a pint.

I need to think of these things now. They are what keep me sane.

He lived his life without letting diabetes get into his way. I think a part of him still thought that he was invincible; I think a part of him never grew up and never grew out of the feeling that it is possible to die. I think a part of him thought that if he was going to go out, he'd go out with a bang. He drank with his buddies all the time. He decided to go skydiving.

These are things you shouldn't do as a diabetic.

I told my sister about my idea of going to the visitation for an hour, then flying back. She reminded me that if my flight was late I wouldn't even be able to make it. I told her that I didn't want to rearrange Dave Adrian's schedule; besides, seeing a friend that would make me laugh this weekend was probably just what I needed. She agreed. She suggested that I take the time to go someplace quiet, maybe in the sun, by a river or something, and spend some time alone, and use that as my chance to say good-bye. That I don't need to be there and see a body to say good-bye.

And she might be right.

I'm beginning to worry that my flight would be late anyway and I wouldn't even be able to get to the Funeral Home and I would spend all day and \$600 to be in an airport, wishing I made it to see him in one of his suits.

I don't want to know which suit he's going to be wearing.

I remember all his clothes too well from when he was alive.

He was always a great dresser. He wore nice suits to work; he had style. He wore vests well.

I remember that when I was in Florida I decided to give myself blonde highlights at the crown of my hair. The next time I talked to him, he said he dyed the tips of his hair blonde. I thought it was funny that on opposite sides of the country, we decided to act on the same whim.

He wanted to go back to school this fall, to the Art Institute. He wanted to buy another convertible by next summer, because after owning a Miata, he knew he couldn't face another summer without a nice convertible. He wanted to work for a comic book company designing and drawing comics. He wanted to paint.

I suggested to Dave Seng and Doug Elwell that maybe when I get back into town that we can all get together, you know, to just sort of talk, to spend an evening in his honor, not crying, but retelling funny stories, remembering him for all we loved about him. They thought it was a very good idea. Dave Seng called it a sort of "going away party." I suggested something less fun sounding. But then again, maybe that's what Dave would want. He was Scottish, not Irish, but maybe he'd prefer if his friends got together and drank in his honor.

We could all do a shot of Jaegermeister for him. That was his favorite drink.

I think I need to take a break from writing. I'm emotionally drained.

I think the crying has stopped, though. For now.

March 3, 1998

5:00 p.m.

I just remembered that Dave and I wrote poems together one night. We were sitting in his studio apartment on Lincoln Avenue, sitting on the couch I got for him (my friend Sheri's mother was giving it away so Dave and I went out with his moving truck to pick it up; Brian said the couch smelled like dogs, he wanted him to get rid of it), and we decided to write poems together. He'd write a line, then I would. Or vice versa. Or he'd write a paragraph, and then I would. We wrote four poems together this way. He'd pick out one word, and then we'd start.

I even wrote a poem for him about visiting at his parent's house for Christmas. Dave invited me to spend Christmas with his family in 1996. They lived in a house in a small town called Walled Lake, Michigan. As the name implied, their house was right on a small lake. His family was extremely nice to me; they were all very sweet, warm and loving people. I played pool with his father and his brother. More than half of the family had a thick Scottish accent; Dave would get the accent too, but only when he was either around his family or when he was drinking.

Once, in his thick accent, he called me a wee cherub.

These are the things I am always going to carry with me.

While I was in Walled Lake for Christmas, a heavy snowfall came down. There was tons of snow on the ground. I wrote a poem about this memory. This, writing is my way to make him live forever.

March 3, 1998

10:25 p.m.

Have talked to Sara and Carol and Doug Ward. They made me feel better. Sara liked the get together idea. I just keep thinking that this is such a shock. I've decided I want to send my new book to the family, since these poems are in the book. Then, with a card, I can also let them know that someone in Europe translated poems of mine into Finnish and has put them into a book and is selling the book in Europe, and that the proceeds from the book are going to diabetes research.

Try to make something good out of this.

His brother, Steve, said that hopefully he is in a better place.

I just wanted to take this chance to thank everyone who has been so nice to me. I have been on the phone and sending e-mail messages to many people today, in an effort to not feel so alone. It has worked. Everybody has offered their deepest sympathies and commiserated with me, and it has really helped. We all will miss him, not just me, and I hope I broke the news as gently as I could to people and helped them as well.

I really value the help everyone has given me. I hope I have been able to be there for you too.

I'm still stunned by this. I'm exhausted; I think I need some sleep.

Hopefully he is in a better place.

March 4, 1998

10:33 a.m.

This August would have been two years. We only celebrated one birthday together. It seems too strange. We weren't boyfriend and girlfriend by the time I started this trip; we had agreed to that. Since I was traveling, we had said our good-byes. We didn't know what the future held for us.

But a big piece of me still feels missing.

I realized that after talking to a few people at the office that I never talked to Tim. Tim is a salesman at our old company; he lived two doors down from Dave and they



became good drinking buddies.

Tim has a big, beautiful black dog. Zeke is the dog's name, I think.

Dave Jarvie had two terriers as he was growing up, and he decided that this summer he wanted to get himself a highland terrier.

So last night I left a message for Tim, and he called me this morning. He was shocked by the news. Susan told him at work while they were visiting a client and after they came back Tim drove over to Dave's house and knocked, because he thought Dave was pulling a trick on everyone. He thought that Dave was still alive. He couldn't believe it was true.

No one can.

Tim and I started talking about how Dave told Tim eventually that we were dating, and that Tim didn't know until after he was told. We all worked together, and Dave and Tim were friends, but Tim couldn't tell. We hung out with him for the Fourth of July this past year. His wife could tell that we were dating.

Tim told me that he feels like Dave is watching us now.

I haven't cried yet today. Tim told me that it would come.

He's probably right.

I've tried to get a hold of my friend Nancy, who also worked with us, but she has been so devastated by the news that she hasn't come into work since she found out. I just left a message with Brandon to tell her to call me. I know she has to be going to go to the visitation tomorrow. I'd like to be able to talk to her before she goes. Dave helped her through her separation with her husband. She liked him.

A part of me still can't believe it's true.

I feel like he just tied up all the loose ends. He was no longer working for our old company. He was finished taking care of our apartment. He returned the e-mail account. He told me he didn't know about Scotland any more, so I should not make plans to go. He even finished the painting.

My grandmother, right before she died, decided to move to Arizona. All of her belongings were moved to our aunt's house; titles were moved and she took care of her belongings just before she passed away.

It makes you wonder if a part of them knew.

I just looked through my will. I decided that if anything were to happen to me, I want the portrait he painted of me to be donated to an art gallery that would take care of it.

What am I thinking, it should go to his parents.

I keep trying to not think of him as dead. I'm not trying to fool myself into believing that he is alive, but when I think of Dave Jarvie I would rather think of the things about him that made him so full of life. I want to remember how emotional he'd get about everything. I want to remember that he went straight to the owner of the company and said he deserved more money - and he got it. I want to remember that he told off everyone that bothered him, and praised everyone that he respected.

He was real. He was alive. And that's what I want to remember.

I wonder how long it will take for me to not look outside each morning and see the sun and think that this is a day that Dave is not seeing. It's a beautiful day today. I just have to keep thinking that he would want us to enjoy it.

March 4, 1998

3:52 p.m.

I went out to get lunch today. Thought I should eat something. Then I decided that I could sit by the pool for a while. I told the people at the front desk my situation and they said they would come and get me if I had a phone call. So I went outside with a book. Sandy suggested I read a book, try to escape for a while.

I sat out there in the sun. And then I just started thinking about him. And I started crying.

I keep thinking about how I wish I could have been there, to call 911, to somehow know that he was in danger. To give him first aid until the paramedics came.

To do something.

I wanted Dave to read my novel in progress. I wanted his opinion because I valued it. I wanted to know what he thought of it.

I gave him an electronic copy of the novel to read. I don't know if he ever started reading it.

He borrowed my copy of the novel "Atlas Shrugged," and wouldn't give it back to me. He liked it that much. He decided he would nickname me "Dagny," after the main female character in the novel, after he read it.

I liked the fact that he called me Dagny. The character was a strong, respectable woman. It meant he respected me.

I wanted him to get that terrier he wanted, so I could roughhouse with the little dog whenever I visited his apartment.

Last Halloween, in order to shock some of my friends, I dressed up in a vinyl costume and wore a black wig. I looked crazy. But I also offered to pick Dave up from the airport; he visited his parents for the weekend in Walled Lake and was coming back home. So I drove to O'Hare airport wearing this black vinyl dress and wig and waited for him near the baggage claim.

He thought the costume was great.

He bought a Gumby costume for Halloween.

I remember that when his roommate was bothering him, he would walk around the room, imitating how she walked.

He always put on a good show.

I remember teaching Dave how to swing dance, and yes, it was the blind leading the blind. But whenever we were in a bar that played big band or slow music, we could always get up and dance for a while. Especially at J and R's tap, that bar that Sara used to live right above. There was always parking, it was never crowded and the jukebox had all sorts of great CDs in it - and Dave's favorite, Tony Bennett. He would always play "Rags to Riches," if I didn't get to the juke box first and play it for him.

He'd belt out the words and dance with me.

Every once in a while he'd invite me over for breakfast. He'd make omelettes; mine had tomatoes, mushrooms and cheese. And sometimes onions. And we'd watch Saturday morning cartoons in his living room.

I write these things down because this is how I want to remember him. I want everyone to know who he was. Dave Jarvie was a man who was emotional. He was a man who got on people's nerves.

He regularly had shouting matches with his coworkers and supervisors.

Temperamental, to say the least.

I remember that when he got his own office at the company he closed the door all the time and played his music loudly. It was company policy to keep office doors open - we had "an open door policy," if you will. The owner complained to Dave's supervisor about the door and suggested in front of me that if Dave couldn't keep his door open he could just have some maintenance people come in and remove Dave Jarvie's door, and then he'd see who would have the last laugh. I told Dave about this, and he laughed so hard at the owner's neurotic behavior. "He'd remove my door? God, the man is crazy."

And he still kept his office door closed.

He didn't want to take crap from anybody, and if he had to take it, he sure as Hell wasn't going to take it lying down.

Sometimes I complained about him, sometimes he drove me absolutely crazy. I always hated how he wore his green Michigan State baseball cap backwards; I told him it made him look like a turtle. Now it makes me smile. These are the stories I have to remember. Too often in life we fixate on the bad things, and we forget what we love about people. We forget how much people add to our lives by just being there.

I could tell so many stories. And maybe I should. Maybe I should write them down. This is my way to remember him. Maybe, when I look back at these writings, they won't make me sad. Maybe, as time wears on, maybe I'll be able to look back at these stories and smile. He gave me these stories. He made my life richer.

I want the world to know this. I want the world to know these stories about Dave Jarvie. I want people to smile and laugh and think wonderful thoughts about Dave Jarvie.

In his most recent letters to me, when he e-mailed me over the past two months, he continually stressed how much he wanted me to be happy. That he wanted me to go travel, to do what I needed to do, and to look at life and be happy. People forget to do that.

I would tell him back that I worry about him, that he should have a job, is everything okay.

He'd assure me that he was fine, that nothing was wrong. I hope he was happy, too.

March 4, 1998

7:36 p.m.

Just got in touch with Nancy.

Nancy really cared about Dave. He helped her through a lot. He was a good friend to her, and she valued him greatly.

I didn't know if he ever told Nancy about us.

When I talked to her, she told me she knew. She said she was really worried about me.

I told her I was worried about her.

We cried a lot.

I tried to remind her to think about the things that made us like him. Think about

the things that make us happy, because he wouldn't want us crying our eyes out.

She liked the idea of getting together as well.

When Nancy heard the news, she couldn't believe it either. Then she searched through her apartment, "tore it apart" were her words, until she found a cartoon he had drawn for her. She had packed it away in a box in her closet. It made her feel better, when she found it, to have it in her hands.

She used to turn to Dave when she needed advice. She wanted to turn to him again. She needed someone to teach her how to deal with this.

And I just have to keep thinking to myself that I have to value life more.

I have to value the people I care about more.

It breaks my heart that he's gone.

I just had to call my sister again and have her calm me down because I'm still crying. It's just so wrong. It's just not fair. I keep thinking that I should remember the good times, but I keep thinking that this is just not right, none of it is. I want to go back and change it all. I want to make things better again.

I go through waves, where I want to cry and cry and cry, and where I'm just fine. At some moments I can explain it all, and be okay with it, and at other moments I'm falling apart.

My sister reminded me of something my grandmother used to always say: that everything happens for a reason.

But I can't see any reason in this. I can't.

I know that if something doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger. I've dealt with other hardships of one kind or another, and I just have to keep thinking that I can become a better person for this.

That I am a better person for knowing him.

I have to keep thinking that there has to be something to learn out of this.

I keep thinking that this is not fair. That he shouldn't have gone. But I have to learn something out of this.

Maybe I have to remember that life is short.

I have to keep that in mind. We all complain about the details, we all let little problems get us down. But we are all sitting here, and there's a new day right around the corner, and we're here, we're ready to experience that.

That is a gift. We should treasure it.

This isn't enough of a memorial for you, Dave. I know it isn't. But I don't know what else to do.

More than you'll ever know, Dave Jarvie, I'll miss you.

March 11, 1998

3:14 p.m.

I tried to remember these things, and I wrote the poem "Death Takes Many forms." I'm sure this writing is not enough.

Nothing is enough.

# Chapter 18

## Louisiana Again



March 10, 1998

9:16 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

I'm writing this from Florida. I have a lot of writing to catch up on.

I haven't written in the past week, well, because I didn't want to. I didn't want to bring myself to write about Dave Jarvie. This is my first chance to have some real time to write.

I have also made the decision - no longer am I writing this for a larger audience. And no longer will I be showing this to a large audience.

After I heard about Dave Jarvie's death, I did two things for two days: I talked on the phone and I cried. Doug Ward found out and called me. I called Sandy back to cry again. I called



my friend Sheri, whom I had not communicated with for months. She had received bad news as well, and only told me about it after I had cried to her for a while. She found out recently that she was pregnant - that was the good news. Shortly after she found out about her pregnancy, she had a miscarriage. She told me she had already purchased maternity clothes. Sheri is a woman who loves children, and she wants more children, and I know this is hurting her, but I had no way to let her know how sorry I was. I felt terrible that I was calling her to mourn to her and she listened patiently until she had a chance to tell me about her tragedies. She also told me her cousin died recently, of surgery complica-

tions. She was a diabetic as well.

Thursday morning I checked out of the hotel. To me it was almost as if I was saying good-bye to mourning, in a way. I had trapped myself in a hotel room, going out only to see the sun or to go across the street to get groceries. When I left the room, I thought I was getting past the place that I heard about Dave Jarvie's death in.

And that would make it a little easier to go on.

When I drove up to the airport, I pulled up to the arrivals gates, by the baggage claim, under the Continental sign. Then a police officer approached my car and told me that since the Oklahoma City bombing (how long ago was that?) they haven't allowed people to park here unless their party is waiting on the sidewalk for them. So he told me I had to circle around the airport over and over again until my party appeared.

Since my car has been starting to overheat every time I idled for too long, this make me very happy.

So after circling around for 35 minutes, I decided to make one more circle before parking my car in the lot and waiting on foot. That last circle is when I saw Dave Adrian from Colorado waiting on the sidewalk for me.

Apparently there was a screaming baby on the second leg of Adrian's flight. He had a layover in Houston and had been traveling for probably around six hours.

So I figured he'd either want to pass out or go out.

It was the latter.

It was good to see him. It took my mind off of bad things, not because he was an escape for me, but because he reminded me that there are intelligent, talented, thinking people out there, and there is someone else that makes the world a good place.

Over the course of the weekend he introduced me to bars I had never visited, just outside the French Quarter, like Check Point Charlie's, and another place whose name escapes me that was the upstairs of a Thai restaurant. They had a good band. We drank and ate and hung out at Jackson Square and the riverfront. Oh, and yes, I did stay in the hot tub as much as possible during the weekend, which would have been much more enjoyable if it wasn't cloudy and raining most of the weekend.

We didn't care if it was raining. We sat in the hot tub anyway.



# Chapter 19

## Travelling to Florida

### Mississippi and Alabama

March 10, 1998

11:22 p.m.

I spent part of one day in Mississippi. Stopped at the first exit, because there was a NASA Space Center there. I decided that it would be worth visiting.

I went on a tour of the grounds, got to see models of engines used for the Space Shuttle, and went through the museum to see a history of Americans in Space.

I love the idea of being in space. It fills me with a sense of joy that I cannot begin to explain.

I always loved astronomy when I was a child. My sister took a course in high school; I was six at the time. I went outside with her and mapped locations of certain stars. Eventually I had my own subscription to *Odyssey* magazine, and astronomy magazine for children, and I had my own telescope. In fact, one of my first publishing ventures was doing book reviews for *Odyssey* magazine. I got paid \$10 per review.

And I got to keep the book.

I still love the night sky. (I guess I made that clear in Utah.) In fact, every time Eugene and I have been driving, I have been able to look out my window and see Orion in the Winter sky.

It's grounding, always being able to look up and see the same stars.

I was talking with Dave Adrian about astronomy and human exploration of space. Although it may be a far-fetched idea, I do hope that one day we will have the technology (and I will have enough money) to be able to go into outer space.

The thought thrills me like you wouldn't believe.

Dave Adrian agreed. In fact, he told me that the main reason why he has no respect for Bill Gates (actually, his words were, "The reason why I think Bill Gates is a pussy..." but I didn't think that was appropriate, but it doesn't matter, because I just wrote it anyway) is because with all the money that he has, he still hasn't used any of it to go up into space. If you had that much money, don't you think you would have been in space

by now?

I thought he had a very valid point.

I found out a few interesting facts while I was at the Space Center:

\* The energy released by the three engines used on the Space Shuttle equals the output of 23 Hoover Dams

\* The Space Shuttle main engine pumps fuel into the rocket engine with the power of 480 automobiles

\* The external tank carries enough fuel to fill 29 medium-sized backyard swimming pools

\* The solid rocket booster is only two feet shorter than the Statue of Liberty.

There was other cool stuff there. But I won't get into it all.

After visiting the Space Center for about an hour, I decided to drive down to the Gulf of Mexico, which was less than twenty miles away, to see if I could find some beaches to enjoy for a while. I found a state park, and the beaches weren't too impressive, but I still stayed for a while.

You know my thing with water.

I walked around. It was windy. I rolled up my torn jeans so they wouldn't get wet. The water was cold. I walked a little more, drew pictures in the sand with my feet, and then headed out.

And Alabama? I got into the state at night, and drove through about 45 miles before reaching Florida. In other words, it didn't make much of an impression.



# Chapter 20

## Florida



March 11, 1998  
4:42 p.m.

Didn't get through to my friend Lisa in Tallahassee Sunday night, so I stayed in a hotel for I swear will be the last night in a hotel on this trip. Monday morning I drove - all day - to my Parent's house in Naples.

I didn't realize it was such a long drive.

A long, long drive.

Part of the problem, I think, was that I pulled a Eugene and decided to take smaller highways from Tallahassee to Tampa. It seemed a lot longer than it should have. Had to stop at stoplights in passing towns, you know.

My car reached 100,000 miles while I was on the road from Tampa to Naples. Eugene had told me that when my car reached 100,000 miles I was supposed to pull over and run around the car, you know, like a Chinese fire drill. I didn't believe him, but I thought it would be fun to do anyway, you know, to say I did it. So I pulled over on I75 and ran around my car. Then I drove on.

Got into Naples at six in the evening. My parents didn't come home from dinner until 8:30.

At least there was a key waiting in the driveway for me.

Well, it took me all morning and all afternoon and part of the evening to get into Naples, even when all I did was eat whatever food I had while I was driving. I'm at my parent's house now. For rest. Recuperation.

My father doesn't like it when I mention that a friend of mine died. I don't think he knows what to say so he just tried to avoid it. That works.

March 12, 1998

10:33 a.m.

I bought groceries with my mom today. What a treat. Ravioli. Mushrooms. Bagels. Little things make me happy now. I added garlic to my pasta for lunch today. I'm much happier now. It's windy here. I hear the weather stinks in Chicago. Maybe tonight I'll start to work on my novel again. I also decided I'm not going to send any more changing gears letters out. If people ask for them, I'll send them to them, but if no one cares then there's no point in my mailing them.

My parents owned part of a mobile home park in Florida. They started it in about 1978 or 1979, which made me 8 or 9 when we first started going there. My parents loved the weather. I spent every Christmas and Easter there. Once I was even there during Halloween, and on another occasion I was there in the middle of summer. (It was 1983, and my first nephew was born while I was there. When my parents got the news, they got me out of the pool and told me I was an uncle.) It's strange spending your vacation time in Florida, in a retirement mobile home park. It was like I had 200 pairs of grandparents there. Everyone knew me, because I was one of the only little girls who visited the park, and everyone there knew my parents.

I came here in November, to cool off after working at my old company. Now I feel like I'm coming here to recuperate from losing Dave Jarvie.

My mother wants to pan meals. I have spent the past few months not knowing where I was going to sleep half the time, much less what I was going to eat. So this extra planning seems, well, excessive. In a motherly way, though, of course, in a way that I now adore.

When I found out a few years ago that my mother had cancer, it made me realize that I really should spend more time with her. My parents aren't going to be around forever. It's funny, if you asked me ten years ago if I would look forward to visiting my parents, I would have laughed at you.

But then again, ten years ago I thought everyone was invincible.

And ten years ago I would have thought that they couldn't offer me any salvation from my life alone. I had so much to learn.

March 13, 1998

10:44 p.m.

I get to watch X Files reruns twice a day on the FX channel. Almost worth the cost of cable. I have a little of a sunburn. I wasn't even laying out - I was sitting with my feet in the pool reading a book. That Darwin book is slow reading, but interesting. But I have to switch between that and the Fountainhead.

Well, there's not much to write here. It's windy. Not too much fun to be outside, but I'm making myself do it anyway - ride a bicycle, go for a walk, I even went swimming, and it was cool. It's my second full day here. Wish the wind would go away and it would warm up.

There's not much else to do here. The FX channel plays old episodes of the X Files twice a night, so I keep myself occupied in the evenings. Thought about taping episodes,

but I already have a full three tapes of that show, and that should be plenty. Should get to the novel tonight, but I should read it over again this afternoon. I can't even seem to write changing gears; how can I go back to that novel? The novel with no name?

Can't get working on my writing. Have been obsessed with coming up with pertinent America Online addresses for poetry mass mailings, and working on my silly databases. I wrote a poem on Dave Jarvie, and I was editing it. It's sad... Surprise. I'm trying to start another one, and I have an idea of what I want to write, but I'm still blocked.

March 15, 1998

12:32 a.m.

I found a great passage from the book I'm reading. It's a little long, about a page, but it's worth it - it's from the book "Darwin's Dangerous Idea." It's a bit scientific (which I appreciate) but it continually comes back to the question that most people grapple with when it comes to Darwinism: how do evolution and religion coexist? It's interesting. Hey, they even mention memes (since they were talking about biological evolution, they brought up the relationship between that and the evolution of ideas).

I started proofing the novel. I just typed it out once; I didn't do anything more than write it, then spell check it. I didn't check for typos, even. So I'm a bit surprised at how many changes I'm making. Normally I don't make errors - not to sound snotty, but usually I'm okay with the near-first draft. This time though, I'm making a few more changes than that. I figured I better go through what I have to refresh my memory on what is still left to write. It's been a few months since I've looked at it.

My dad has psoriasis - the skin disorder, and it's pretty ugly. He puts creams on all over his body, and he has these blisters all over his hands and arms and legs. He wears gloves on his hands at all times because he needs so much cream on them all the time. Today I had to put a few bandages on his elbow because he scratched when he wasn't thinking and he was bleeding everywhere.

I asked my dad and his friend Bob Killabrew (isn't that a great name?) if they would do some of their wood working for me. Since my dad has retired he has gotten into making wooden toys and stuff, and he's done it for years now and he and Bob share scroll saws and other tools when they're both down here in Florida. Well, I asked dad if he would make some of his toys - trains, cars, little toy rocking horses and the like - for me. He made some for all the grandchildren in the family, but I figure he'll be dead by the time I have a child, so I told him that since he probably won't want to make toys when I get around to having a child, could he make toys that I could hold onto/ I told him that I like the idea of being able to give my child toys that their grandpa made. He said sure.

I felt like such a dork asking him to do it. I told him that since I had my car I could take them home with me, versus if I flew. The thing is, this is not the type of gushy question I'm used to asking him.

So I felt awkward asking.

The weather is supposed to be nicer by the weekend. It was too cold for the fishes to come up for food at the lake. Usually I go to the lake with breadcrumbs for the fish

and the turtles, but none were in sight today. Will have to wait for it to warm up.  
Took another bath today. I like big bathtubs. But I'm sure you guessed that.



March 16, 1998

9:17 p.m.

I was getting hardened again. I'm sure you know what I mean - you look around and hate all people, dive into work, and forget emotions. I almost asked my father out of the blue yesterday if he had to deal with incompetent people when he ran his business, and did he hate them as much as I do? Dave Adrian suggested that

only women liked Ayn Rand. Well, I guess I can see a romantic aspect of Ayn Rand's writing, but her view of people and the world and work and the sense of values that come through in her work, and it's that aspect of it that I love. And that is what makes the main characters, the ones with a love interest, seem that much more romantically passionate.

Well, I brought up Ayn Rand because she very eloquently brings up the differences between people - she portrays the people who cling on other's successes - which is most everyone. I think in one of her novels she calls them "second-handers." And when I read about those people, and believe me, I can equate with people I know, it makes me sick. Someone else understood what makes people so despicable, and wrote it in a novel. And so I was just thinking of this, and it made me think of the people in my life and it made me ill. When I think about a lot of things concerning my past, or people I know, I get ill.

I just want to know that I will never have to live on their terms.

Decided to tentatively call my novel "The Key to Believing." It's a line from the book, and it works for now. Have another 100 pages of novel editing to do before I can start writing it again. Now that I'm starting to read what I wrote again I'm getting to like it. I think I was getting to dislike it, but after I edit what I have I just might be able to write more of it. We'll see.

But since I've been editing it, I haven't been doing much writing otherwise.

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It's after ten now, and mom and dad have been in bed for a while. And there was a knock on the door, which is strange, because not many old people are up at this hour. So I get over to the first door, open the curtain and unlock the door and get out onto the porch, then I open the outside door. And it's Ruth, a perpetual drunk from next-door saying that I locked her out. She thought she was at home; she was at the wrong house.

March 18, 1998

9:13 p.m.

X Files is over now. Now it's a toss-up between "American Justice," where I can

learn more about the woman who killed her two children, and... Well, silence, I guess. Although I hate to admit it, I do have something of a fascination with killers. Because I want to understand their mind. It's not something I think about often, but if there's a show on about a serial killer I'll watch it. I find hearing about people like Hitler and Manson fascinating - how someone can think like that. It's not something I find interesting, I mean, I think their actions are sick, but I'm so amazed that people are capable of thinking about things like death and still have them actually be able to go through with it. I personally don't even believe that the death penalty is fair or right, at least not in a free country. Then again, this country isn't as free as it should be. We slowly lose our rights here every day.

The story I'm watching now, Susan Smith I think was the mother's name, and she did a few press conferences, saying that she can feel that her boys were okay, and that they have to take care of each other. Those boys were so adorable. The parents appeared on all three morning network news shows. They're replaying everything now. She was just tired of having two children to deal with. She was divorced and she wanted to feel single again. She drove her car into a lake. How do you let your two boys drown like that? How do you give birth to two boys and begin to raise them and then kill them? Michael and Alexander were three years old and fourteen months.

I don't want to have children now. I don't even know if I want to have children. Well, maybe one. I don't know. But what I do know is that if I made the decision to have a child I would give that child so much love that they wouldn't be able to take it. I'd teach them things I wish someone taught me. I would make them feel like they were worth something.

It's just hard to imagine.

Okay, I'm going to change the subject.

I'm still watching this show about Susan Smith, so it's hard for me to change the subject. And as I said, as disturbing as it is, I want to watch it. I wonder if it's the same syndrome as the one where people want to look at an accident scene, they want to stare at the ruins.

But an accident is just an accident. I don't want to see gore. It's not destruction I want to see. I want to understand why people would do these kinds of things. I don't even like hearing about garbage like this when it first comes out on the news. I prefer something like this show, a long after the fact analysis with more information than you could get at the time. Am I strange?

March 19, 1998

5:18 p.m.

Not much goes on here in Naples. I try to read during the day. I try to write at night. I watch more television than I should. Now I know why I don't have cable. I'd watch "Talk Soup" and "X Files" over and over again. I wouldn't get a thing done.

It's been overcast for the past few days. Since there has been the threat of rain, I have not gone to the beach or to the Everglades. I wanted to do it during the week. Ah, well.

I went shopping today. Bought a long grey fuzzy skirt to match a shirt I bought in New Orleans.

My mom gave me a white tuxedo jacket of dad's today. It seems that every time I'm here now she gives me a few items of clothing of hers as well as dad's. Then she found for me a pink tuxedo shirt, with the ruffles and everything. And she found the cuff links too. Dad obviously doesn't want it.

I wonder if I can incorporate these items into a cool outfit.

If anyone could, I have the confidence that it would be me.

But then again, these items of clothing really are a stretch.

Went to the Saturn dealership today. Was wondering if the window-rolling problem (the loud clanking noise it makes when it's almost closed) and the overheating problem were something that needed to be fixed immediately. Well, the window would cost \$200 to fix, and it wasn't doing any damage to the door or the window if I just let it go. And the overheating was just because of the warm temperature - the fan still would go on before it got too hot. So everything was in order. Which made me happy.

March 22, 1998

2:49 p.m.

There's a street party here in the park. My parents started this adult (translation: senior citizens) mobile home park in the late 70s. It's not an RV park, but a prefabricated home park, so the homes are quite comfortable for two people to live in all year. Anyway, there's an outdoor party today and they have a band (which consists of a woman with a guitar and a man with an organ - a piano, mind you...) and two kegs of beer and food and people are dancing in the streets. And then mom and dad danced to a song. Dad said they were doing the cha cha, and I'm not sure if that dance was actually the cha cha or not, but I have to admit that it was so cute to watch my parents dance. I keep thinking that they always loved each other. They have always stayed together. How many couples their age have that luck? And when they do things like dance together, I just think it's so adorable. They still love each other, so much. It's just so cute.

And then a little later dad started dancing to the Tennessee Waltz with me. I think he only danced for half the song because he didn't want to spill on him the beer I was holding while I was dancing with him.

So I'm on line all day, taking breaks from the old people street party (well, at least there's two kegs of beer) to check my internet connection. I'm hitting my web site when I'm not writing quick notes.

March 22, 1998

3:56 p.m.

Hi. The street party is still going on and I want to KILL PEOPLE. Sorry. It's just that I'm getting a little tired of listening to this two-person band play the Pennsylvania Polka and Proud Mary and Margaritaville and the like. Ugh. I keep saying to myself, free beer... free beer... free beer... But it's not enough.

Bob Killabrew, the friend of my father's who does woodworking stuff with him, well, I told him I was bored. Now every time I see him I put my head on his shoulder for a minute, like, "help me." It's my silent plea for help. He keeps laughing when I do it.

So to save myself I'll occasionally come in and write a quick note.

Oh, they're playing Brown Eyed Girl. I can hear it from my living room. Wait... It's not Brown Eyed Girl, it's that song, "daylight come and me wanna go home." That's not the case for me, though, I can still hear this crap from my home, so it won't do me any good to stay here.

March 22, 1998

7:22 p.m.

The street party is over. There was this one guy, some "Arab" guy, as my father coyly referred to him, who got drunk and offered his wife to the Scottish maintenance man. Strange. So now I'm watching television.

March 24, 1998

4:45 p.m.

Moving on.

I'm in Tallahassee now.

I was supposed to be an eight-hour drive, so I gave myself eight and a half hours in order to meet Lisa Newkirk when she got home from work. Instead the drive only took me six and a half hours, and now I'm sitting here in a parking lot of a strip mall near Lisa's house waiting for... Well, I don't know. I suppose I could just wait here for two hours for her to get home, but it seems to make more sense to actually do something.

I left a message for her. I plan to call back a little later.

I suppose I could sit in her driveway.

Tallahassee is warm, like southern Florida, but when it comes to plant life it is more like New Orleans, and other southern states, like Mississippi. There are real trees, not just palm trees, and Spanish Moss hangs from the lowest branches, making it look like you could find a southern plantation here.

Wow. It's been a few weeks since I have seen real trees.

The time in Florida was nice. It's strange; when I'm there it's like I'm not on the road, I'm at home. So there hardly seems any point in writing about it.

Tallahassee, on the other hand, is a city I've never been to.

There's a prison across the street from this strip mall. Lisa told me on the phone that it was a women's prison.

Hope there's more to see than that.

Drove south yesterday and went to the Everglades National Park for a while. Hung out.

Other than that, my two weeks in Naples were pretty much like they always were.

Watched the Oscars last night. Cher wore something hideous, as usual. Would it really be the Oscars if she didn't?





# Chapter 21

## Alabama Again

March 27, 1998

The drive stinks through Alabama.

Oh, wait, I saw two billboards worth mentioning. One had a picture of a man putting a wedding ring on a woman's hand, and it said, "Safe Sex: It was God's plan from the start."

No lie.

The other one had no picture on it. It just said, "Go to Church - or the devil will get you."

No lie.

# Chapter 22

## Tennessee

March 28, 1998

3:05 p.m. Central Standard Time

Met C Ra McGuirt last night. I have worked with him in the poetry world ever since I started publishing "Children, Churches and Daddies," back in 1993. He submitted work to my magazine, and was so thankful that I accepted his work he asked what he could do for me. I told him to start his own magazine and publish me.

So he did. He started the magazine "the Penny Dreadful Review." Asked for advice. I tried to help him out.

For a while he went through bouts of depression, and I would try to help him through them. I ever wrote a few poems about it. He has thanked me over the years through letters for my support. I didn't think I was doing much. We lost touch for a while, until I found out that he finally got access to e-mail. We have stayed in contact regularly, thanks to computers, and when I told him I was coming through Tennessee he told me to come into town at the end of the month so I could witness the monthly poetry "Penny Dreadful" meeting of Nashville-area poets.

So here I am.

We talked for a long time last night. His friend D. Philip Caron (another poet I have published through Scars Publications) was over and we drank a lot of cheap beer. "Prime Time," the beer was called. The design looked cool on the cans, I thought; it was very modernistic. There was a gear on the can with the words in modern sans-serif typefaces circling around the gear. C Ra said it looked like "The Worker's Beer," like it was some sort of Communist propaganda beer. "After a hard day of manual labor at the factory advancing the cause of our people, relax and enjoy Prime Time beer. Workers Unite!"

We thought it was funny.

Today I'm just trying to get work done. C Ra is at work until 3:30. He's making a stir-fry tonight. Currently he has bread, peanut butter and cheese. Oh, and a little fruit

and some potato chips. Ah, the bachelor's life.

Brian Daly is coming over for dinner tonight as well as coming for the meeting. Brian Daly was a subscriber to "Children, Churches and Daddies," and he really (apparently) liked the magazine and my work. C Ra keeps telling me that Brian is looking forward to meeting me.

Should be interesting to see how it goes tonight.

I have to get the word out to everyone about my press, and get them to submit work. I'll give out some chapbooks and try to sell me book. I'm almost out of them.

Well, I'm almost out of the one box I brought with me. I can't seem to give away enough copies of my first book, "Hope Chest in the Attic."

Back when I had no idea how many books I should print, I printed far too many copies of "Hope Chest." But they make nice Christmas presents. I look at that book now and think about how awful the design of it is. But we all grow, I suppose.

C Ra read my novel, or what existed of it so far. On the whole, he liked it. It makes me feel better about writing it. Doesn't give me any incentive to currently continue writing it, but it does make me feel a little better. He offered some good suggestions.

All in all, it has been very productive, the 20 hours I have spent here so far. I'm going to give C Ra my business cards and ask him to stuff them into submission letters people mail him.

I've got to get my name out there somehow.

March 31, 1998

9:34 a.m.

Okay, so I haven't written much. It's hard when there are things to do and when you've decided you're no longer writing this for an audience.

Okay, this is what has been going on.

Drinking and writing.

I haven't seen any of Nashville. (That's okay; I've been here before on business and saw stuff then.) I have pretty much been in this house for the whole weekend. When I could stand to drink, I did. When I could stand to write, I did. I finished a poem that I had been wanting to finish for a while. And I wrote about eight more. And I finished chapter eleven of the novel.

Now I just have six or seven more chapters to go.

I met all the big poets here on Saturday night. Brian Daly even gave me some garlic, since I apparently write about it so much. To show him my appreciation, I ate a clove raw, right there.

We went out to dinner Sunday night, where we got yelled at for pipe smoking. (The table, not me; I haven't taken up pipe smoking.) We sang a lot of songs. (Among others, I remember singing "Don't Cry For Me Argentina." Why? Don't ask.)

It occurred to me yesterday that since Dave Jarvie's death I have been slipping in this sort of downward cycle of depression. I've been getting more and more bad news, and bad things have just continued happening, and I had lost a lot of my motivation.

Dave Adrian reminded me of that, actually, because I was taking it out on him.

I think I needed him to slap me around a bit. I don't like being depressed. I shouldn't be depressed.

So, that's it. Time to move on. I can do anything, I'm pretty sure of that, so nothing can bother me right now.

Oh, I'm sure I'm not making any sense. But that's okay, I understand it perfectly.

Today I leave for Indiana to see my friend Brian. It's the last stop on my trip. Then it's home.

C Ra was a very gracious host. He was very nice to me, and it was very nice to see him and talk. It's amazing how many nice people there actually are in the world, if you look for them.

# Chapter 23

## Kentucky

March 31, 1998

2:25 p.m. Eastern Standard Time

I've been in Kentucky a few times, to Louisville, well, to be exact, to Shepherdsville, which is 16 miles outside of Louisville (you know, in case Louisville wasn't small enough for me) to do press checks at the printing plant my old company worked with (who said there wasn't perks at my job?). Every time I went I stayed in my hotel, because there was nothing to do. Every time I went there, it was an effort for them to find a restaurant that served meatless dishes. I remember once eating in their cafeteria and all I could eat was the green beans and mashed potatoes. That is, until I tasted the green beans and realized that they had been cooked in bacon fat.

These are my memories of Kentucky.

They did give us a little sightseeing while we'd be in Louisville; I saw where they hold the Kentucky Derby, blah blah blah...

I just think whenever I think about Shepherdsville that the printing company was pretty much all there was to the town. As they grew they even started to fund the local high schools, to generate classes that would help the students prepare for a life of working at the printing plant.

You know, like manufacturing little cyborg workers.

Well, you could believe that if the people that worked there seems to have any intelligence.

But this was Shepherdsville, Kentucky.

Oh, wait, that doesn't tell you much about Kentucky, but there's not much I can tell. Today I'm only going through it to get to Bloomington, Indiana.

I remember once that my mother was taking a flight across the country and had a layover in Louisville and there was bad weather and so she was going to have to sleep

in the airport because it was too late to even get a hotel, but then one of the women working at the airport terminal offered to give my mother a place to sleep.

Oh, wait, other than letting you know that that one woman was nice, that doesn't say much about Kentucky.

Oh, never mind.

# Chapter 24

## Indiana

March 31, 1998

8:41 p.m.

Am at Brian's now. We are both tired. Brian just flew back from a long weekend in San Francisco.

April 1, 1998

7:21 p.m.

So I'm sitting here in a bar... Its Called "Bear's Place." Brian is working with a director of a play he's stage-managing at the booth next to me. Actually, he wanted me to go to the bar with him, even though I wouldn't really get the chance to talk to him or anything, because in all my Changing Gears reports I kept talking about going out to bars and the ambiance at those bars and such and he didn't want the Indiana reference to be, "Well, I saw my friend Brian... and then I went home."

When I come to Bloomington, I'm not going to be a tourist, though. Bloomington is a college town, a relatively nice one for its distance to Chicago (only four hours). There are slopes in the roads that are vaguely reminiscent of hills, which are vaguely reminiscent in an interesting landscape, versus the blinding flatness of the Illinois plains. The campus for Indiana University has really nice buildings and pretty nice landscaping. All in all, it's not a bad place. Being a college town, it's not too expensive either.

And somewhere I heard that Bloomington Indiana had the highest gay population in the country. No, not San Francisco, or some larger metropolitan area, but Bloomington, Indiana.

But one thing I've noticed about Bloomington is that it seems that when people come here for school, something sucks them in and they don't want to leave. I don't

know if it's because the town is so perfect or if it's just comfortable and inexpensive enough.

Brian Tolle is a friend of mine from high school. Well, we didn't go to the same high school, he went to another school in my district, but I met him through school. He was quiet. But funny, and nice. I thought he felt like an outsider, but I never understood why he felt that way. I thought he was charming, funny, yadda yadda yadda, and I felt bad that he didn't open himself up much.

But we were friends, and we had fun, and I thought of him as one of my good friends for life.

And you know, you never really know who you're going to remain friends with. I don't talk to most of my friends from high school; we all just went our separate ways. There are only two people from my high school days that I still have any communication with. Brian is one of those people.

Brian and I stayed in contact through college. He'd drive to visit more than I would, because he had a car. I remember he'd send me letters, and he'd barely write anything, but he'd color the envelopes and design them so elaborately that the envelopes were sometimes better to receive than what was inside of them. One envelope, for instance, had a full color beer bottle on it, with the top label as the return and the front label as my address. It was a shame that the Post Office had to stamp a postmark on them.

Once he sent me a letter that had written on the envelope, "Instant Princess Kit Inside!!!" In side was a piece of paper with instructions to fold tab A into slot B of the enclosed pink paper, then put the strip of plastic wrap in the hole at the top of the cone. Instant pink-princess-cone hat. It was a riot.

But I digress.

Brian and I have remained friends after college, but now have the chance to visit each other more often because we both have access to cars and don't have to ask for our parent's permission to take a train to visit each other if we want.

And it's strange, even though we have lived in different places; we've actually gained more in common over the years and have grown closer together. Which is really nice.

It's always a treat to visit him, because when we're not talking about our Macintosh computers and swapping tips on how to work with them we're usually talking about how we think about life, or what kind of things bother us with the world, and it's really nice to be able to talk to someone like that.

He's a good friend.

I told him today that whenever I ever get married (will I be walking down the aisle with a walker?) I want him to stand up in the wedding party. He asked if that meant that when the person conducting the ceremony asked if anyone had a reason for us two to not get married, he would stand up.

All day today I worked on my computer. In the morning I worked on line with my web site redesign. Then I wrote a bit and then I used Brian's computer to do a little work. Then we did some troubleshooting on my computer. I couldn't get one thing to



work on my computer.

So Brian asked, "Did you rebuild your desktop?" I answered, "This morning, actually."

"Did you reset your P-RAM?"

"What keys am I supposed to hit again?"

"Command, option, p and r. As it's restarting."

I did that. Still no luck with fixing my computer problem.

Brian decided to call Indiana University's tech support. They had never heard of my problem. "Did you throw away your preferences file for Users and Groups and File Sharing?"

Brian thanked him and got off the phone. We tried it. It worked.

Brian said after we checked my computer, "You know, I've been working with these Apple computers for ten years now..." And I started laughing. "And we never think of throwing away the preferences files."

I told him then that this would be my new philosophy, my new "tech support for life," so to speak: that if all else fails, throw away your preferences.

Well, we geeks thought that was funny.

April 2, 1998

8:43 p.m.

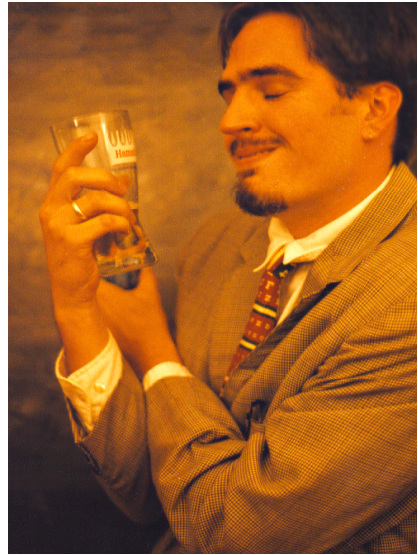
I probably won't be able to write for long; we're going to a movie tonight. Brian has free passes. It's some French film by someone who is supposed to be famous when it comes to French films.

A woman named Katie just came over. Katie is extremely thin; she almost looks unhealthy. She walked in and said she didn't feel well because she went to Denny's and ate only whipped cream and maple syrup.

I needed to write that down.

Brian talked about how he was at a party in San Francisco and it was really boring and there was this bans of five guys wearing dresses and they were pretty boring and then two women came out with white hair and they had mesh over them and they were walking and throwing little bursts of fire and they were naked and then they kissed and when they stopped they pulled back and they were connected with ribbon in each of their mouths and Brian thought that this all was so boring.

And I was wonder at what point our generation become so desensitized.



April 3, 1998

9:39 a.m.

Went to see that movie last night. Brian liked it, but thought it was extremely boring. I'm trying to figure out how something can be likable and boring at the same time. I thought it was awful. It made no sense to me whatsoever.

Shows you how artsy I am.

We left about half way through the movie, even though it was free.

We went to a bar called Nick's to have a drink after the movie. I have been to Nick's once before, when I was in town with my friend Nick. He thought it was necessary to go in there, his name being Nick and all. Brian doesn't like that bar because it's filled with what society considers normal people. He wanted to leave. His friend Pam was enjoying her beer, though, so we stayed for a while.

A few people asked me yesterday after hearing about my trip if I was excited about coming home. The only thing I was excited about was doing a little settling down, was not having to worry about someone else's schedule or imposing on someone else. I could buy food and make my own meals in my own kitchen. Beyond that, no, I'm not looking forward to coming home. Now I'm going to go back where no one valued the things I value and do things that no one understands. I'll have no more interesting stories to tell (as if anyone wanted to hear them anyway). Now people's first question to me will no longer be, "Where are you now?" but "So when are you going to get a job?" And I'd hate to have to explain to them over and over again my plans.

I'm only at home for tow weeks before I go out of town again. I'm going back to Denver, stopping in Omaha each way to see Doug. In Denver I'll stay with Dave and visit Tom and look into job opportunities and temp work and freelance work and prices for apartments and their locations. Am I going to move there? I still can't say for sure. I've discovered that no matter how much I try to plan my life, things always get in the way and attempt to destroy what I wanted. And although I usually win, I can't say for sure that I will win every battle for the rest of my life. But I guess I have to keep trying.



# Chapter 25

## Home Again

April 4, 1998

11:37 Central Standard Time

I'm home now. I said good-bye to Brian this morning, got in the car and drove for one last time. It took four and a half hours to get back to Chicago.

As soon as I got into the Friday afternoon traffic of the Dan Ryan and the Kennedy expressways I was back to my old self. That is, yelling at cars and changing lanes and becoming Type A Personality person again.

Old habits die hard.

I got in and found Eugene's open suitcase and duffle bag sitting on the lounge chair. Why is it there? I don't know. I grabbed my stacks of mail and took them to the spare room, since there is currently no furniture there, to sort through it, you know, and found stacks of newspapers and bags of materials to be recycled. (He thought he could hide it there and I would never notice, I'm sure.) As I started noticing more things, I wrote down a list for him. He was still at work.

- I paid all of the April rent today - you owe me \$225.
- Why are all your papers all over in every room? (And your suitcase?) Could you please remove it?
- Nice pile of recyclables in the spare room. When are they going?
- What is up with this keychain? (There is a keychain on the kitchen counter with one key on it and a picture of a shirtless man on the key ring.)
- Why were dirty plastic cups in the cabinets?
- Can you cover food while it's in the fridge?
- Why were dirty aluminum cans in the cabinets?
- Is that small pile of tissues on the toilet your excuse for toilet paper? I've bought toilet paper for one and a half years. Get some tomorrow.
- Helpful hint: if you spread bath towels out after use (instead of leaving them

clumped up), they might have a chance of drying.

- Why was one of your shirts in the bathroom closet?

I could have mentioned that there was an empty paper bag from Taco John's in the refrigerator, but I didn't. I didn't want to sound like I was bitching...

I really should try to let these things roll off my back, I know, but why would you put dirty dishes in the kitchen cabinets? Out of sight out of mind? Is it too difficult to put them in a dishwasher? He doesn't even have to wash them by hand. "Hmmm... I could open the dishwasher door and put this cup in it... Or I could tuck it away in the cabinet with the clean cups in the hope of getting bugs!"

Oddly enough, I could have been meaner in the note.

I unpacked the car, got my mail sorted and into my bedroom, and then quickly showered and got ready to meet my friend Steve Nellemann. He is an officer in a Latino Law Student organization at DePaul University and they were having a banquet tonight announcing scholarships. So I went there, met him and his mother and aunt, had dinner, and listened to Steve make a little speech and introduce the keynote speaker for the night. Then they announced the scholarship winners, voted upon by faculty... And Steve won one of the scholarships. I was shocked; I didn't even know he was eligible or had applied. So that was cool.

But I was tired, and you can really only take watching your friend talk to everyone else for so long, I mean, he had people to mingle with, so I took off at around 10:30.

And I came home, and Eugene had come and gone, and the dishes were still on the counter, as were the aluminum cans, and nothing was moved from the dining room (like his open suitcase). So I did the dishes and put away the recyclables and started unpacking.

# Afterward

by the author

April 21, 1998

12:11 p.m. Mountain Time

Well, I'm in Denver again, this time checking into temp agencies and career placement companies and apartment rental agencies. I was home for two weeks, where I saw my sisters and some of my friends.

I went to a party that my sister Sandy was throwing for her friend Larry. Eugene met up with me there. I heard a song that reminded me of Dave Jarvie - "Fly Me To The Moon." I had made the decision not to let myself get depressed about Dave's death, but as soon as I got home one thing after another reminded me of him. His painting is on my wall. He made a flower out of paper and wire, and it's in my bedroom on the dresser. There were pages of written notes from him of phone messages when he was taking care of the apartment. I found a note he wrote me right before I left for the trip in one of my jacket pockets; the p.s. said, "If I don't get to talk to you before you go, be happy, my love."

So when I heard the Frank Sinatra song in the bar, I raised my beer glass; Eugene followed my lead. And we toasted to Dave Jarvie.

I visited the places where I read poetry, and saw a few friends. Got to spend more time with Brian Hosey, which is always a good thing - we've let time separate us, and I hope we're going to start catching up on that time lost.

But in all honesty, two weeks was about all I needed before wanting to leave again. I decided to come back to Denver to look into the idea of possibly moving here. I stopped in Omaha for a day to visit Doug again, and he was glad that Eugene wasn't with me. We gossiped a lot, and it was fun, but I have to admit that I'm not fond of driving seven or eight hours by myself. I've been in Denver for almost four days now and I think Dave Adrian is already sick of me. I think I'm crowding him too much. I'm

going to see Tom tonight so Dave doesn't have to have me around bothering him.

I don't know for sure if I want to live here. My father asked me while I was in Florida, "So, when are you going to get a job, anyway?" and I had to explain that I was working on making a small business for myself but there was no point in starting a business if three months later I was going to move. So I'm planning now, and when I move, then I'll start working again.

I'm discovering that I'd have to put about two thirds of my belongings into storage in order to not be crammed into an apartment in the price range of my choice.

And now I'm filled with so much indecision.

Actually, for once in my life it doesn't bother me too much, not having everything planned. I've been wondering if I could move to Denver for a year, then move on to someplace else - maybe Seattle, or Louisiana or something. I have no idea. Maybe if my sister moves out of my parent's house like she's planning, maybe I could live for free in a house in Palos Park and save money.

I don't think I've ever felt the feeling I have now, the feeling that the future is boundless. I have no idea who I'll marry or even if I'll marry, where I'll live, what I'll do to make ends meet. It's a strange feeling.

Not an entirely bad feeling, but a strange feeling nonetheless.

Even though I don't know what all the answers are yet, I feel like for once I have choices. And I'm not afraid to make them.

April 28, 1998

7:13 p.m. Mountain Time

Yes, I'm in the road again. Went to Denver for two weeks. Stopped in Omaha. So far on this trip I have done some writing, a lot of reading, a little drinking and a lot of relaxing in the mountains. The thing I like about the Denver/Boulder area is that mountains aren't far away - along with cliffs, streams, bridges, waterfalls and other beautiful attractions.

I've been working on my web site during the days, but I try to take a break to visit the mountains daily. When you sit there, looking at a mountain, you can't think the world is bad.

So I've been visiting Dave and Matt and Tom, and today I decided to take off for Yellowstone National Park. So I drove through Wyoming (a new state for me) and am now in a hotel in Montana (another new state for me), because since its still technically winter I have to drive in from the North entrance.

Montana doesn't have a daytime speed limit, which originally sounds cool - in fact, I kept the cruise control locked in at 88 for the first 20 miles of the state. But then I read a notice that said that doesn't mean you can speed, per se, because cops can still pull you over if they think you are driving irresponsibly.

Unambiguity in the law. Yummy.

May 2, 1998

9:33 a.m.

I just wanted to let everyone know that yes, Eugene is still alive. I haven't killed him. Now that I have traveled separately from him I enjoy seeing him and talking to him when I am back in town. (Would that be "absence makes the heart grow fonder"?) I think that on some levels he has calmed down and started complaining less (although last night he complained to me on the phone that there are too many expenses, and that some people can't just take off and travel. Sorry that I saved my money, Eugene, but please don't blame me for the misfortunes of others).

That sounded bad. I didn't mean for it to. But I have come to the point where I can't hear him complain anymore, because it makes me complain.

I mean, its not that I want to close off this whole changing gears thing with a cute little anecdote, like, "What did I learn on my life-changing trip," but I have been thinking about what is different for me now that the long trip is over. It's hard to even say that the long trip is over; I don't feel like it's over. I was only home for two weeks when I took off again and visited Omaha, Denver and Boulder, and Wyoming, Montana and Idaho. And when I get home I'll be home for five days before I leave for Bloomington Indiana again, and then for Champaign Illinois. I'm already planning a trip to Seattle, and I'm just trying to decide if I'm going in July or August.

The long trip is over, I suppose, but my life hasn't gone back to the way it was.

The past few months have been filled with wonderful things and terrible things. I have laughed and cried, gained new friends and lost people very close to me. I don't quite know yet how this will all affect my future, or how long I'll be thinking about it, or if this is something that my grandchildren will hear stories about. I know that as I've taken this trip everyone has told me that this has been a bold step for me to take in my life.

I never thought it was bold. It was just something that had to be done.

So what have I learned after all of this? I've learned that there is a lot out there. I've learned that mountains are beautiful. I've realized that being a stranger in a place allows me to be things and say things I normally wouldn't allow myself to be or say. I've learned that life is short, and the price I paid for that knowledge was too high. I know that I have to make a conscious effort to live and to be happy, because it is too easy to let yourself fall into a slump and let life happen to you instead. What is the point of living life if you are just waiting for your death?





# Addendum

## later author notes

September 22, 1999

It is strange for me to come back and read these last notes, considering what has happened to me in the last 14 months. Let's see if I can do this in a checklist:

- I got engaged. I guess that one kind of throws a glitch in eventually going to Europe, which was still after the further America travel.

Because I'm supposed to, I should also then add that John is wonderful. Yes, that is his name, and that is his photograph up there. It's one of the few photos I have taken of him... With all that I have gone through, he has made it somehow worthwhile. Because he's there.

...That was sappy of me to say. Please do forgive.

- My parents sold their house. I guess I have no home to visit there anymore... who needs the place you grew up in to be around anymore, right?

- I may be moving to Pennsylvania. We (John, the man I will marry, and I) are going to check it out. He wants to leave his work here in Chicago, and has a good job offer in Pennsylvania.

- I almost died. When driving to visit my parents a month and a half after my after-ward was written, a car hit me from behind on route 45 and knocked me into oncoming traffic. They say my tires left skid marks for 108 feet. The beauty of short-term memory is that I don't remember the day, or the few weeks following. I was in a coma for weeks and in the hospital for months. The first thing they said to my mother when she was waiting for me to visit was that they would like her to come to the hospital and identify a body.

John remembers that day, he was on the road and route 45 was blocked off because there was an accident. He didn't know he would ask that girl to marry him less than a

year later.

Well... I know I could come up with more things to list, but Hell, I think that is enough... I work as a model, whenever they get around to taking my picture, do I sound bitter about their service, oh, it wouldn't be like me to complain though so I'll change the subject, I occasionally still write, and am still usually angry at almost everything.

Trying to get a job in my field when I'm still on medication for the accident and when have been away from the industry for two years now makes it a little difficult. My life has changed in so many ways, in addition to the ways it has changed from last year, from before the accident and after the trip, that I am not going to play psychologist and tell you how. It just has.

I think I'm still trying to work out some answers here for me, so I can't necessarily help you with coming up with general answers that work all the time for everyone. If you find out what they are, could you let me know? I would figure that by now I should have come up with those solutions, then I could be like Hogan from Hogan's Heroes, or MacGyver, or however you spell that, from that other television show. I mean think about it, isn't that the wonder of bad television, that these protagonists can make weaponry and life-saving equipment out of rope and a little tape, but that people like that never seem to exist in real life?

I guess that's kind of like soap operas, too, where NOTHING like that happens in real life, but people like to watch it.

Maybe they know nothing like that happens in real life, but they like to think of a world where that is normal, where good can happen and everyone could be happy.

I know that is not always the case. But sometimes luck can fall your way, and sometimes you can make the best out of what you have, and sometimes you can create your own happiness. It is possible, if you are willing to really try...