

Promo

Book Two – Survivalist to Thrivalist – One Woman’s Journey

The Road to Freedom

During tearful good byes that I shared with my younger brother Paul and oddly enough my mother, she assured me when she said “I’ll keep him safe while you’re away” and I possessed a warning tone when I replied “I guarantee that I’ll be checking in.”

Hearing her reassuring words were a rare selfless act that I’d experienced from her in my direction and it gave me hope that my words regarding Paul were finally heard. He deserved a life that matched his sparkling blue eyes and shouldn’t have included the things he’d already witnessed, and only she had the power to change that.

My travel companion and I equally contributed to a credit card providing us with a grand total of \$3000.00 Canadian dollars. This wasn’t a lot of money seeing how we were going to be gone for an undeterminable amount of time, but we knew we’d make it work.

We travelled light but effectively on a motorcycle that normally wouldn’t be considered a touring bike by any stretch, but it was quite comfortable considering this fact.

We utilized a tent and a tarp that we’d rolled up and placed behind me for back support. On each side hung our saddle bags that we nestled our sleeping bags on top of, which felt like I was sitting in a big cushy chair being held together with bungee cords. Inside of our small saddlebags were the bare essentials of personal items and minimal clothing geared towards warmer climates because that’s all there was room for.

Included in our necessary collection of belongings, we each took along one small item of guilty pleasure. I added a pen and a thin notebook to write a journal of the different people, places and things we witnessed and Steve took a disposable camera to document his adventures.

Our first problem occurred when he said to me “I want you to take the pictures.”

I balked at the idea of holding a camera in my hands.

The very thought of it felt dirty to me as it rolled around my brain and although Steve knew why I was hesitant, he encouraged me to use it.

His reasoning made sense when he pointed out “I can’t because I’ll be driving and I promised to send pictures home so there isn’t much I can do to change that.”

A camera represented my father and was a disgusting reminder of the photos he’d taken of me as a young girl that were not photos that should be taken by a father of his daughter.

I’d spent a better part of my life being objectified and manipulated through the lens of a camera but this was different so I hesitantly accepted the responsibility.

I assured myself that I wasn’t hurting anyone and was instead capturing once-in-a-lifetime memories, which eventually became a positive distraction from thinking about the object I was holding in my hands.

I was trying to live in the moment as I reclaimed and made peace with my past while trying not to worry about my future, which was not an easy task.

Through willpower alone I’d successfully stopped drinking and smoking marijuana previous to our departure but cigarettes remained one of my closest friends. I was a smoker for over a decade but the morning we left I quit cold-turkey without batting an eye. I didn’t have a choice really. Steve wasn’t my boyfriend but he was my friend and wasn’t a smoker and I respected that.

He was allowing me to invade his time and space and I’d promised him that I’d free myself from everything and smoking was just one of those things.

It wasn’t that hard to be honest. I was regularly dissuaded by my face being covered by a helmet and my lips grinned from ear to ear as a spectacular world that I’d only seen in books whizzed my me.

This trip signified so many things that weren’t visible on a surface level. It was the first time in my life I was actually free: free of being the pseudo mother to Paul; free of my mothers and older brothers fits of rage; free from my father’s forever lingering stare; and I was completely free of intoxicants.

Some moments however were spent sitting on the back of the bike wailing loudly as I released the anguish and frustration I was feeling and allowed it be consumed by the rushing wind.

I’d yell and mentally struggle with the demons trying to invade my blissful thoughts as I fought to find some long-deserved peace of mind.

My companion never said a word but I knew he was there if I needed him, I wasn't alone. My mission was to heal myself and no one could do that for me.

We quickly travelled towards Jasper, Alberta and eventually crossed the border into the United States where there were many stops, 22 to be exact. We even ventured into Mexico twice.

We visited, stayed at and passed the most magnificent views all of which equally took my breath away. The blue skies and new experiences were abundant and soul healing as on day 38 of our journey we made our way towards California for a planned stop.

Although I'd never met any of my family who lived there before, a cousin of mine offered us accommodations in her home for our stay in the state. I was touched by the gesture of kindness that I was unaccustomed to receiving from people I called my family and we accepted the invitation.

Shortly after our arrival she introduced me to her sister and her sisters husband and soon after that, my mother's sister, my aunt Lily. Through a couple of phone calls, she and I had established a long-distance bond that held a special place in my heart but the moment we hugged in person I felt like our spiritual connection was forever sealed.

After meeting all of these wonderful people and seeing how much love and joy they shared I questioned how my mother's sisters and families were healthy, stable, and normal and mine... was not. I wondered why my parents were so fucked up when everyone else appeared sane, loving, wealthy and successful. It gave me hope that there was another life out there waiting for me.

One night after dinner, my cousin and her family surprised us with the gift of a card that contained enough money to buy tickets for a day at Disneyland. As a young girl I'd hoped of one day wearing a set of mouse ears like the happy children I saw on TV but never dreamed that it would actually happen, yet here I was, and it was going to happen.

A couple of days later my hope turned into reality as we happily entered the magical gates of Disneyland where I was transported to a childhood giddiness and grinned like a Cheshire cat until my cheeks ached. I hugged Mickey Mouse and Goofy and went on a couple of rides that didn't go too fast or high because I preferred my feet on solid, unmoving ground. My life thus far had been a rollercoaster ride that I was trying to get off of, however the *Tea Cups* and *It's a Small World* were a true reflection of why Disneyland is known as the happiest place on earth.

The sky was blue and I was happy.

We then stayed at my aunt Lily's home for a week so that she and I could solidify our new aunt-niece relationship. I allowed myself to be vulnerable as I shared with her some of the traumas I'd experienced throughout my life.

She was nurturing and soft as she offered to help alleviate the negative energy that I was carrying around with me through hypnosis. I wasn't used to people helping me but was accepting as she whispered "I want you to envision a heart-shaped pink box and I want you to fill it with the trauma, hurt and darkness that colors your world."

It was relaxing and helped a little to heal me a little more but unfortunately, I'd deeply buried more than I was aware of and secretly knew that no box would ever be big enough.

My self-doubt was still sabotaging my healing process.

It was time to move on, so we said our thank you's and good byes and moved on to San Diego, California for a couple of days. While there, we stayed with an elderly couple we'd met previously in our trip who were on vacation and invited us to visit them when we were in their home area. We were taken to the zoo and a wild animal park and they made feel welcomed as we cooked together and stayed overnight with them and left the next morning.

The warmth and friendliness that we were shown by complete strangers at different points of our trip was very welcoming to two young people who were far from home. I also learned that not all people I was related to were toxic, just the ones in my immediate family.

On December 22, 1988, we arrived on South Padre Island, Texas. We decided that we were going to settle in and stay there for Christmas holidays. I was at peace and felt blessed to wake up on the beach in the morning, while being lulled to sleep by the sound of water lapping the shore at night. It was so serene there and I never wanted to leave.

On Christmas morning we woke up bright and early to watch the sunrise over the water, which was a spectacular gift in itself. We played under the sun and connected with mother nature as we strolled up and down the beach finding and collecting sea shells and sand dollars to send home as gifts for our families.

In the afternoon we walked up immense sand dunes and decided to have rolling races down them and I filled the air with my squeals of delight on every turn. It was thrilling and exhilarating fun but turned out to be dirty business thanks to the 94-degree Fahrenheit humidity. As a Christmas present to ourselves we walked the two miles to town to indulge in refreshing, cool showers, wash our clothes, and phone home. It was a perfect day.

I'd spoken with my mother a couple of times to check up on Paul and was receiving glowing reports from her thus far. I just hoped she was telling the truth.

Typically, her words held no gravity with me and I usually didn't believe what was falling out of her mouth until I could see it with my own eyes but I chose to remain optimistic.

While we were in town cleaning up, we received another unexpected gift as a nice elderly couple invited us to eat dinner with them in their motor home that they were traveling in.

We immediately said "Yes please!"

In the past, Christmas didn't represent a time of celebration for me but it brought me back to a dirty and neglected eight-year-old girl skinning a squirrel for dinner in the woods trapped under dark cloud conditions.

I was no longer that mistreated girl; I was a free, sober and hopeful young woman who was creating happier memories to replace her past.

That night we feasted on a delicious Christmas dinner that consisted of succulent roast beef with creamy mashed potatoes and gravy and tangy pineapple upside down cake that we shared with loving and kind strangers. I never wanted it to end. I went to sleep soundly that night under a clear sky with waves gently lapping at the beach and a heart full of unforgettable new memories.

The next night however, storm clouds blew in and forced us off the beach in an aggressive manner and in the direction of our next adventure, Florida.

Before finding a campsite as we arrived in *The Sunshine State*, we stopped at a dive shop to stock up on supplies and buy some gear so that we could try snorkeling. Once inside, a man approached us and said "I can see by your license plate that you're a long way from home during the holidays."

We had a brief conversation and within minutes he'd invited us to stay at his home with him and his family, instead of paying for a campsite and we willingly accepted his generosity.

Although he offered for us to stay in the house, we opted to sleep in the great outdoors.

We were two kids from Alberta where at present time it was forty below zero with eight feet of snow on the ground. We didn't want to be inside; we wanted to be close to nature and appreciate the balmy blue skies while we could because we knew cold days and home were in our near future.

We didn't use our tent either but chose to sleep on a piece of foam rubber that we placed under our sleeping bags that was kindly offered by his wife. We set up camp underneath their house at the edge of their carport that was mere steps away from different underwater worlds in separate canals.

My decision to sleep outside unprotected changed a few mornings into our stay when I blearily opened my eyes to being stared down by a wolf spider the size of my hand. I appreciated nature great and small but not that big, hairy or close to my face. I didn't know I could move so fast half asleep.

There was a canal running right beside where I slept that offered therapeutic comfort around the clock and soothed my soul the way only nature could. It hummed and lulled me to sleep at night while it's refreshing waters revitalized me during lengthy morning snorkeling excursions.

It was a silent and fascinating world of spider crabs, queen angelfish, shrimp, and sea anemones that all lived harmoniously in and around the beautifully colored corals. I spent countless hours discovering the inhabitants of the waterways through my mask that I was surprised I didn't come out looking like a new species of giant, wrinkled creature from the sea.

The day before we planned to leave, we were invited by our host to take a boat trip with them to go snorkeling at Looe-Key Sanctuary Preservation Area which is a coral reef in the middle of the ocean and we enthusiastically said "Yes!"

I was scared to get in the water at first but am grateful that I was able to get myself in because two of the most incredible things happened.

At one point, I was being adventurous and swam a little further away from the boat than I intended on when I noticed a large shadow approaching. I nervously glanced over my shoulder to see a sleek and silver armored, prehistoric looking fish that was the same length as me with razor sharp teeth. I recognized it as a barracuda and its approach startled me. I screamed out in fright so loudly through my snorkel that I was told that I could be heard on the boat. I could've reached out and touched this magnificent fish and was exhilarated and giddy with delight.

A few moments later, as my nerves were winding down, I set out again and this time bravely swam through a pulsing school of thousands of silver dollar fish. This experience was quite the opposite from my last encounter as they engulfed and tickled me into being their cleansed student. My body relaxed as I succumbed to the natural healing process I was experiencing as they repeatedly kissed the bubbles of air off of my skin and I envisioned each glistening orb containing a trouble from my past.

To close out our memorable day from Looe-Key we watched and took pictures of a rare sighting of two giant green sea turtles mating out in their natural habitat. This was hands down one of the best days of my life, one that would hold great appreciation for the rest of my days.

Despite our love of travelling, we'd been gone a long time and decided that it was time to head on home.

We packed up the next morning and said our thank you's and good byes knowing that we had some really long, hard and cold days coming up as we made our way North.

Our first day on the road, Steve drove for almost 12 hours straight through rain and sleet, leaving behind our sunny skies meanwhile Canada was locked in a deep freeze and we'd just arrived ill prepared.

The last day of our adventures took place on January 28, 1989, the day of my twenty-first birthday and the first day of the rest of my life.

We were greeted by the day with a rude awakening as to why motorcycles are not and should not be driven during the winter months. Despite our warm gear, the two of us were as frozen as the roads we were travelling on which currently were covered in a blanket of thick ice and blowing snow and were undrivable.

Our final realization came as we were leaving a gas station in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba and slipped on ice and dropped the bike onto the road only to slide off into the ditch just as a semi-truck barreled towards us. The bike landed on my leg and hurt Steve's wrist, meanwhile, his motorcycle was hurt all over but we were alive, terrified and still breathing.

Although we were almost home, we couldn't make it the rest of the way on the busted bike so Steve phoned a friend to come and rescue us; thankfully he agreed.

We waited at a truck stop for eight hours and eventually thawed out while discussing the highs and lows of our journey and plans for our futures. He explained to me that he was clear on a path and believed that mine was still undetermined, and although we'd just shared this amazing experience, it was time for us both to move on.

We weren't a couple but it felt like we were breaking up and I was sad but pretended to understand when he said "It's not you, it's me; we'll keep in touch."

My heart was broken but I was also filled with so much appreciation for his contribution in my life to be anything more than grateful. I respected his decisions and quickly brushed away the tears and buried my hurt feelings until I could sort them out in private.

After what seemed like an uncomfortable eternity later, our rescuer finally arrived loaded us up and hand delivered us safely and soundly back to Edmonton, Alberta.

I'd successfully traveled sober for 150 days as we traveled through twenty-two states, three provinces and visited Mexico twice on my road to freedom. It was much needed connecting with family, new friends, mother nature at her best and worst, discovering my passion for photography and myself; and it was over.

I wondered what the future held in store for me.