Contents

List of Illustrations vi
Introduction 1

1. A Beginning 7
2. From Iowa 17
3. We on the Pigmy Road 52
4. Echoes on My Ribs 77
5. From the Cliffs 97
6. Mountain Vistas 112
7. Galloping Bare-Breasted 135
8. A Heap of Living 165

Introduction

In 1924 eight young women drove across the West in two Model T Fords. They camped out for nine weeks while traveling over nine thousand miles and visiting six national parks—without a man or a gun along. One of these women was my grandmother, another my great-aunt.

I was in my thirties and evaluating my own life when it struck me that their lives were unusual. I set up an interview with my Grandma Marie, her sister Laura, and another traveler named Grace. They were ninety, eighty-five, and eighty-eight respectively. I thought that once they were together their eyes would light up with extraordinary memories; that they would lean forward on their canes and transport me to another time. It didn't happen that way. The trip was no longer a whole to them—they couldn't remember what route they took or which adventure happened where. It was as if vivid vignettes, retold and polished over time, had slipped into their memories as fragments and were now cast in something other than the day-to-day life of driving on dirt roads for nine weeks. It made me think about history, about how subjective it is and how much of it vanishes when anyone dies. It also made me wonder why certain pieces remain.

Grace said, “It all comes back to you in little bits of stories.”

Laura told one beautiful tale of park rangers’ singing “Rock of Ages” from the bowels of the Carlsbad Caverns as bats flew out in a sky-darkening swarm, but it turned out to be from a different trip. She exclaimed throughout the interview, “I can’t believe how much I’ve forgotten!” She did remember visual scenes—glaciers, lakes, mountains, and colors. Grandma Marie remembered practicalities. She was the leader, responsible for such things. When I asked her what they saw in Yellowstone Park, she answered, “The whole thing.” Grace remembered vignettes like the first time she drove or how she felt hiking at altitude without breakfast. Laura commented later that Grace probably remembered so much because she had gone blind. “She’s had some time just to sit and think about it.”

Other subjects kept popping in—family, mutual friends, current events. The women were so polite it was hard to know what was real. The only disagreement was that Laura loved newspaper comics and Grace thought they were foolish.

When I left the initial interview at Grace’s house, Grandma Marie walked behind me and Laura behind her—each one tapping her cane over the buckled sidewalk. “I can’t believe how much I’ve forgotten!” Laura exclaimed again. Grandma Marie’s reply was immediate: “That’s because you live in the present.” This was the main nugget for me from that first interview. The 1924 road trip was just one summer’s adventure for these women. It was outstanding only as a beginning.

I tried to piece their hazy memories from 1924 into some semblance of order and time, but there were too many gaps. Surely it was a great, risky adventure that must have thrilled them then, but the giddy rush of facing the unknown didn’t hold. Their memories were like dried fruit, innately flavorful and nourishing but without the juice. Still, with an unexpected life of its own their story came to me, often with huge holes and little emotional connection, whether I liked it or not.

Three years after the first interview I discovered Zelma, a fourth living traveler. She gave me the journal she kept, written on the road—complete with a tedious, though precious, listing of every single town they passed through. It was just the framework I needed. But when I asked about the stories—the jokes, the personalities, the arguments—she demurred, saying the others could probably remember those things better. Later she sent me a brief, formal account of the trip she'd written from details in her journal, but I found she sometimes misread her own smudged, penciled hand. For instance, "HOTEL" was underlined in the journal as a single-word description of one of Marie's anecdotes. But in her formal account both her vision and her memory failed, and Zelma wrote that it was "HOT" in Green River, Wyoming.

Two years later Laura died, and her daughter found a trip journal in an upstairs trunk. Laura had kept a running account of her version of the trip, but she apparently forgot that too. Marie died six months after Laura ("It's hard to lose your sister," she said when she was unable to attend the funeral), and two years after that, nearly ten years after the initial interview, a neat bundle of letters appeared on a shelf in the family home. The notation "Mailed home by Marie and Laura on trip to West Coast Summer 1924" was in Marie's handwriting. Obviously the trip was important to her or she wouldn't have taken the time. Still, she compiled these letters, titled and stored them carefully, then forgot them.

As my feelings for the ladies and my sense of the spirit of the story evolved, my frustrations mounted. I believed their 1924 summer trip was interesting, unusual, and a history worth telling, but there was so much more to these women than that. Laura and Grandma Marie had a powerful impact on my life. I experienced their strength, their zest for living, and a simultaneous connection to and dissonance with each other. But in the modest way of their generation, their stories depicted little of this—little of themselves—and I only knew them as old.

I looked at the old photographs, taken on their trip with a Brownie box camera. Some are sharp and some are not—a reminder that in those days Kodak processed the film but did not make the prints. This step was done at home. Someone, most likely Grandma Marie, laid the negative right on the paper, exposed it to light, and soaked it in chemicals to develop and fix it. Not a very precise method, especially without benefit of photo equipment or indoor plumbing.

The album pages are black construction paper, and each of the fifty-nine pictures is captioned in white ink in Grandma Marie's handwriting. There she is as a young woman swimming in the Great Salt Lake ("got a swig up my nose that nearly knocked me out"), and there is her sister, Great-Aunt Laura, grinning while pushing a Model T ("mountain roads"). Here they are wading in the Pacific Ocean ("great sport to have the surf rush up"), sliding down a glacier on Mount Rainier ("snow in July"), and standing beside their Model T Ford ("the whole gang"). They are sturdy girls, with bobbed hair and wearing knickers. I could almost hear Grandma Marie chuckle as she looks over the pictures with me. "There weren't slacks for women then," she said, "so we had to wear knickers." What else was lacking for women who wanted to drive across the West in 1924?

Tucked in the back of the photo album is a modern portrait of Marie and Laura. My husband took it at the last family reunion they presided over. It was the first year that beer came out from behind the corncrib and cold ham sandwiches weren't served at lunch. Laura is eighty-seven and Marie ninety-three, two white-haired old women in flower-print dresses. Marie leans on the silver handle of her cane and looks straight into the camera without hesitation, her skin still soft and beautiful. Laura gazes up and away, admiring the beauty of the trees, her lips parted. How could I do them justice?

I wrote other stories about Grandma Marie and Laura as I knew them, about other generations in our family, and about myself. The connection I sought was elusive, but as I washed my own experiences and emotions together with theirs a certain sensibility crept into me. Although separated by time, age, and geography, I found our stories blended so naturally that it should have been obvious: although the juice of their stories had evaporated long ago, I still wore the scent. To evoke their youthful selves, I had to remember mine.

1. A Beginning

I first saw the bluffs when I was four. We drove from California to Iowa in a Volkswagen Bug. I could stretch out in the back seat, with my little sister in the space behind that we called the back window. It was the first of many car trips to Iowa, always in the summer. The July heat was miserable, with little fluctuation day or night. Who wanted to visit Iowa when it was ninety degrees or more with 90 percent humidity? Or drive across Nevada or Nebraska without air-conditioning? Even Mom doesn't understand it anymore; she says she wanted to show off her little family. But every year? Our record was forty-two hours straight. At least at night the sun wasn't beating on you through the windows. Once at the farm, we unstuck our thighs from the vinyl upholstery, tumbled from the car like overcooked spaghetti, and staggered bleary-eyed toward the bathroom. At least we could move.

Grandma Marie and Grandpa met us in the gravel driveway, under the towering elm tree, oblivious to our stale odor. They lived in a white frame house on top of a hill, bordered with hollyhocks. Around and behind it were arranged the corncrib, chicken house, garage (which was the original home), old outhouse, and huge red barn, with various wooden and wire fences and a concrete watering trough big enough for swimming but too filthy. In the distant fields we could hear the lowing of black-and-white cattle and the chugging of old tractors.

By the next day we kids were clean and rested and into it all. The old frame house and farm were novelties for us, raised in single-level California homes. Instead of playing on manicured squares of lawn, we raced barefoot across a yard of mowed weeds, treacherous with thistles, and screamed across endless wild pastures.

Grandma Marie always arranged a family gathering, but not at her home. We drove a mile into the sweltering, breathless lowlands to the family home, the Brick House by the bluffs. In California we had only two cousins, and most of our socializing was with friends we chose. In Iowa it was a multigenerational swarm of relatives. Perhaps Mom had an inkling of the texture available there, and that was what fueled our journeys, or maybe she craved the familiarity of these gatherings.

Once the meal was over, the youngsters weren’t expected to sit still and be polite. The heat and mosquitoes at the Brick House were the worst, but the lightning bugs in the evening and the frogs, fish, and coolness along the trout spring drew us away from chatting adults. We ran as a pack, hunting arrowheads above the spring, searching out half-wild kittens in the barn, and shouting as we swung and leaped from ropes in the hayloft. We roamed the hills and climbed the bluffs, white limestone cliffs rising straight from the yard. Hiking to the tip of the Big Bluff was a rite of passage, both the first time you were taken up and the first time you climbed it alone.

My great-grandfather, Grandma Marie’s father, bought the bluffs instead of bottomland because they reminded him of Norway, his homeland. It was an impractically romantic choice in the northeastern corner of Iowa, where farms are judged by the amount of tillable ground among the rolling hills and limestone outcroppings. His children grew up there. In spring when the oak buds reached the size of a mouse's ear, they discarded their shoes and ran through the lush green up, up into the woods, and the hillsides embraced them. More than the house, these cliffs defined their home.

On that first trip to Iowa when I was four, Uncle Bill and Aunt Darlene and their five kids were already at the Brick House when we arrived. My cousin Renee was five. "We climbed the bluffs yesterday," she said. I remember looking up at the mottled white cliffs. With no perception of distance, I thought they were farther away and taller, and I imagined my cousins as small as ants climbing straight up the craggy face. "My brother jumped from one to the other," she continued. I couldn't picture that at all.

The next morning Renee whispered, "I'll take you up the bluffs, but don't tell anyone." We hovered at the back screen door, looking out for the rooster and his flashing spurs. It took only a moment to learn to fear him, longer to learn to carry sticks to defend ourselves. We made a dash for the woodshed and crept through the nettles along the back until we could peer around and run for the corncrib, then duck under the electric fence and slip down a short bank into the dry creek bed and safety.

The creek bed was white with limestone, the rocks dry and light as old bones and covered with fossils. Back then this creek still flooded every spring, washing away last year's growth and debris and uncovering new rock faces. We were supposed to follow the creek up a ways and then turn onto a steep cow path up the back end of the bluffs, but Renee was losing her nerve. She couldn't remember the right trail. Finally we turned around. We were chased by the rooster and stung by wasps on the way back.

That afternoon Uncle Bill took a bunch of us up. How he knew the right cow trail we couldn't figure. It led to the wooded portion of the ridge. From there we hiked on level ground, glimpsing space through the trees. The trail ended abruptly with a crack in the earth. The rocky point split away from the lush underbrush, and we peered from the safety of the trees as if from a cave. Though the chasm separating us from the limestone tip was only a foot wide, it was twenty feet deep. My head spun and I felt as if it could suck me right down, but I held Uncle Bill's hand and leaped across. Renee crawled around.

You can see a long way from the tip of the Big Bluff, but there isn't much to see—cornfields, farmhouses, and rolling, tree-covered hills vanish into the humid haze. The bluffs themselves are the most beautiful things around. A flock of pigeons flew by, wheeling together, the sound of wind on feathers changing with every turn. I wondered what it would be like to jump off. We waved at our moms and the babies down below and hiked back. I told my sister I had jumped from one bluff to the other. She squinted up in disbelief as I tried to point out where.

Three years later my mom took my sister and me up. I was surprised by her sudden competence and confidence in these woods. Though she'd lived in Albuquerque, Seattle, and Los Angeles, my mother's first response to something new was always the startled resistance of the fourteen-year-old country kid named Gertrude.

Looking back I realize it was a new experience for me, not her. I'd never put my foot on a strand of barbed wire and lifted the higher strand to let someone through. I didn't know where the gates were and couldn't tell one manure-stained cow trail from another. That winding mesh of pathways was to me what the Los Angeles freeways must have been to her. She grew up running over these hills, learning the lay of the land the same way she taught herself to read. She grew up on a nearby farm, on the edge of the prairie, but whenever the extended family gathered at the Brick House on Sundays and holidays, she came here and explored it all.

On the way back she took us on a different trail. It curved from the middle of the ridge out to the lip of the cliff and through a small clearing. My mother said that Great-Uncle Ben had killed a wolf there with an ax while the family watched from below. Then the trail cut sharply down a rocky cleft and ended when our feet sank into leaves. The light changed from glaring to cool beneath the canopy of trees, and the hillside below us was still nearly vertical with little underbrush, only tree trunks. As if through a curved tunnel, we could see the Brick House below.

Mom said, "What you do is pick a close tree and run for it." We watched in horror as she demonstrated. This was not our mother. But we found it was truly more dangerous to try going slow than to simply fling ourselves forward through the ankle-deep leaves. So we hurled ourselves from tree to tree, screaming toward the bottom.

~

One day many years earlier my grandmother, a young Marie, stood on the tip of the Big Bluff and watched ash pour into the sky on a high wind, dimming the sun. Soot and the smell