

Heading West 1976

My phone rang. It was Mary, a girl I dated in high school who told me she had something very important to tell me and she didn't want to tell me over the phone so she asked if she could come over right away. I had just turned 19 and wasn't very experienced in handling emergencies so I couldn't think of anything to say other than "Ok". My head was spinning trying to guess what this was all about because I hadn't seen Mary in ages and I couldn't imagine that anything going on with her could have anything to do with me. I was in my second year of community college, rented a house in the suburbs, had a full-time job, owned a car, which I drove to the city to watch foreign films and see bands from England. Next thing I remember is her red Malibu screeching into the driveway and Mary bolting out of her car slamming the door behind her. I became fearful that something terrible had happened to her and I already wonder why she picked me to help her. I met her at the front door and invited her in offering her something to drink but she immediately grabbed my arm and looked directly into my eyes. Hers were clear blue, fierce, urgent and almost wild as she sternly pleaded, "Ken, we've got to get out of here"

I didn't know what to make of this request. Then she explained that like me, she had been attending classes at the local community college and working at a job when she was suddenly struck by the realization that if she continued in her present life she would end up getting married, or settling into some very familiar routine and ordinary life and years from now she would look back on her mundane life and regret that she hadn't really made an effort to search for something new and different. She was determined to escape from this dreaded and anticipated future by moving out west before it was too late. I understood what she was driving at since I had just read "On The Road". She told me she was going to wrap things up here, quit her job, give up her apartment and head out west and did I want to come along? Something in her vibrant urgency resonated with my psyche and mixed with the relief that there was no real tragedy to cope with so I told her I would join her. Then we set a date several months into the future. I didn't see or speak to Mary much during those months but when the date arrived she drove into my driveway with her shining red Malibu, It was a clear warm day in the beginning of summer when we headed out west. First we stopped at the local pond and both threw our house keys in and watched them quickly sink to the bottom. Several years ago, in the dead of winter, we ice skated on this pond. Well, it was the first time for me so I actually did more falling then skating while Mary laughed hysterically and glided in circles around me.

Epilogue

This story has been dramatized a bit but the basic story is true. It was 1976. I had moved away from home and was sharing a house in Pennsylvania with a friend of mine in high school when Mary made this offer. She had planned to move permanently to Los Angeles and I planned to take the summer off and travel across the country. I intended to return by September. Although I didn't see Mary before our departure date, I learned she had enlisted another friend of hers to come along so there were three of us to share gas and expenses. If I remember correctly I had saved \$600 for this trip. We had a tent and cooking supplies and lots of cassettes for the road. We spent 6 weeks, racking up 6,000 miles as we zig zagged across the country making decisions about where we were going next day by day. We slept in campgrounds for something like \$6 a night. We would pitch a tent, make a fire and cook simple meals. We ate a lot of peanut butter on bread. With the exception of Kansas City we stayed on the outskirts of town and in

the countryside. We spent time hiking in the Grand Tetons near Jackson Wyoming. Our car broke down near the town of Gillette Wyoming. Because I wore a t-shirt with Philadelphia on it I met a man seemed to be an outlaw of sorts. He had a big gold tooth wore a cowboy hat and drank Tequila. He lived in a trailer on the edge of town and let us stay on his property where other cars were parked with campsites scattered about. Apparently he rented space on his land for cars to park and pitch tents. There was some construction nearby that needed temporary workers and people traveling through this town were staying to work and pick up a little cash before moving on. He took a liking to us and he invited us into his trailer where he drank and laughed and told us incredible stories. He told us he didn't even own the land he rented, he just parked his trailer there and one day someone drove by and was looking for a place to stay so he let them stay there for \$5 a day. Then others came and eventually it just looked like a campground. He told us he was originally from Philadelphia. We had the feeling he had spent some time in prison and even wondered if he had escaped. He was friendly to us and when we told him our car was broke down he told us not to worry, he would fix it for us. We appreciated the offer but went to town to see if we could get an estimate on fixing the car at a local gas station. The first gas station we went to spent 15 minutes and told us it was the transmission and it would cost \$200 to fix it but he couldn't begin working on it for a few days. Then we went to the only other station in town and they were just closing for the weekend and told us to come back Monday. So we went back to our friend who told us he would fix our car tomorrow. It was a Friday. On Saturday we couldn't find him all day and when we caught up with him he said he would work on the car Sunday. On Sunday we went to his trailer and asked him if he could work on the car today and he said "Oh no, I'm sorry but there's a rodeo today. You must come to the rodeo" We began to doubt that he was ever going to fix our car but we went to the rodeo and it was quite an adventure. We felt so out of place but most people were very friendly. The entire town was there. The men from the gas station, their families and probably anyone else who lived in this tiny town was there. On Monday he finally towed our car several miles through desolate dirt roads out of town to a garage in the middle of nowhere and proceeded to take apart the engine. Apparently it was something to do with the pistons being loose and he tightened them up and put it all back together in a couple of hours. We were ecstatic. We asked him how much we owed him and said he didn't want any money because if ever needed help he hoped we'd do the same. Before we left town we doubled back to the liquor store and bought a six-pack of beer and dropped it off at his doorstep of which he was very grateful. We continued driving north and south inspired by beautiful sights and blotches of green on our map. Eventually we arrived in Portland Oregon. Mary and her friend Mark had become a couple and I was feeling a bit left out and somewhat bored by this point. I was more adventurous than my travel mates who really didn't like cities so I set out on my own in Portland. I ended up going to see bands play and struck up a friendship with the lead singer. He told me they were playing in Seattle next and told me I should come. I talked Mary and Mark into driving me to Seattle. I loved Seattle and wanted to stay a few days but my friends were anxious to head on toward California. This is where it all gets fuzzy for me. I know that I left them and we made arrangements to meet again but I can't remember how or where we would re-connect. I hitched a ride to Vancouver, BC and spent nearly a week there. I made another friend who had a radio show and was interested in studying film at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. I visited the campus and fell in love with it. I thought about staying in Canada but learned that it wasn't so easy to immigrate. Plus I had made an appointment to rendezvous with Mary and Mark in Seattle and drive with them to California. Somehow I met up with them again and we all drove to Medford Oregon where my cousin Gary lived. Like I said everything gets fuzzy for me at this point. I barely remember being in Medford but I have some photographs of my cousin Gary and an image of a police car with "Medford Police" on the door so I know I was there. The next year of my life was a wild one so I am curious about what I was like in the days I spent in Medford because it seems to me that those were the last days of me that had planned to return to Pennsylvania. I think of my time in Medford like being high in

the air, the last cusp of a gigantic rollercoaster hill. The moment before the huge descent. There I was, the me that had still planned to return to Pennsylvania. After Medford I went flying down to San Francisco and ended up swirling into another life and world that spun me in circles for an entire year. I hadn't planned to live in San Francisco. I intended to visit Los Angeles then return to Pennsylvania. After Medford the three of us drove to San Francisco. We saw a faint road on the map that seemed to cut through a mountainous area that we thought might be a short cut to the west coast. It ended up being a long slow treacherous ride on unkept roads that seemed to wind around on the edges of land that felt like cliffs. We drove all night so there was horrible visibility and it seemed that there were no other cars on this road. After hours and hours we actually thought of retracing our path back and going on bigger roads. Somehow we made it through and the next day we were in San Francisco. By this time we were all exhausted and not really enjoying each other's company anymore. I wanted to see San Francisco and Mary and Mark were anxious to go to Los Angeles. We were driving around the city and suddenly I spotted a Lance, a friend of my cousin Dave's that I met when I visited San Francisco when I was in high school. I'll back track for a moment to this, my first San Francisco trip and possibly the first long distant trip took on my own. I had impulsively bought a plane ticket to San Francisco when I was 16 because my girlfriend had just broken up with me and I was devastated. I needed to do something to help me get over it. I had been corresponding with cousin Dave by post. He had invited me to visit and told me I would have a place to stay. I took him up on it however on such short notice I arrived and he wasn't in town. I really didn't know what to do so I rented a hotel that was advertised in The Christian Science Monitor. It was the Sutter Hotel - I'll never forget it. It was too expensive for me to stay there so I moved to a youth hostel. Each day I called David's house to see if he got back and one day a man named Lance answered and said they were expecting me to call and I was welcome to stay there even though David was out of town. I ended up staying at David's house meeting some of his friends, in particular Lance, who was very kind to me.

Lance was excited to run into me like that and we had lots to talk about. Mary and Mark were impatient to get going so I told them to go without me and I would meet them in LA. Lance let me stay at his house for a few days and he showed me around town. Then I made my way to Los Angeles by hitch hiking down the coast. Los Angeles was a nightmare for me. Unlike the other cities I had been too I didn't make friends and couldn't find a place to stay. I quickly headed back to San Francisco. I was so happy to arrive back in San Francisco. It felt like home to me. I had finally run out of money and Lance helped me get food stamps and find a job. I was working for Social Services going to the houses of elderly men and women who needed help with shopping or house chores. In many cases they were so happy to have the company they would make coffee and serve cake and we would sit a talk for a few hours. Then I got a job serving food at a busy lunchtime cafeteria for business people. I moved out from Lance's house and got my own small apartment. I had a million things to do in San Francisco. I went to museums, poetry readings, cafes, rock clubs, and discos. I picnicked in the parks, went to movies, and ate at restaurants. Life was fun but also confusing, as I really got lost in all the fun. I had many adventures and ended up changing my living situation almost month to month. After a while I felt the need the need to move on. I met a woman who I was beginning to develop a relationship with when I decided I wanted to go to New York University to study film. It was the only college I applied to and when I was accepted I began making plans to move to New York. In the summer of 1978 I left San Francisco and from my parents house in Churchville began making trips to New York City to search for an apartment and a job. I loved the energy of New York but it was not easy finding an apartment I could afford. Well it was not easy and during this time my girlfriend in San Francisco decided to come join me in New York and found a school that taught piano tuning. By fall of 1978 we found an apartment, I got situated with jobs and we both started school. And that's how I ended up moving to New York City.