

WEST OF PENNSYLVANIA

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To wonder and wander.

But mostly to just get lost.

WATERSHED

As unnerving as any transformation occasionally is, it can be slightly more so to recognize it in oneself. It seems to pose as the onset of mental illness. A person begins to notice that things once true for herself are no longer, a fancy and self-absorbed way of realizing, “Hey! Look! I'm different now!” with various degrees of jubilation or surprise. The unnerving bit is the recognition of a change that is of an entirely different character from the initially observed “illness”: *I'm not changing in the way I thought I was.*

This is the thing with transformation, though. We can't really choose it. Choosing your own transformation is just making a decision, like resolving to get a new job or deciding that you'll have fewer scoops of sugar in your coffee. Nobody *transforms* into someone who likes black coffee. Kids don't choose what happens to them in puberty. Adults have some control over their maturity, but only in superficial ways. This sounds as if I'm plugging fate as the mechanism that ultimately determines who we become, but it's not that. It's that the world mostly doesn't respond to us the way we want it to. Not a big surprise to learn this.

But think about it. If I'm living my life, making choices that I believe will point me in the direction of my goal, what happens when I'm wrong about that? Where do I end up when I'm just a little wrong a lot of the time? I keep correcting and re-correcting to stay on path, but at some point I muster enough self awareness to reflect and find that I have no idea how the hell I arrived *here*. That feels like fate, but it's very clearly different.

Fate is the idea that you're going where you're going no matter what you do. *This* is the realization that no matter what you do, you can never really know where you're going.

1. *Iowa*. I thought I'd misheard. I was probably doing the dishes or something. *Iowa*. Nope, heard correctly. *There's no way I'm moving to Iowa*. From the moment the words escaped my lips, I understood both that there was a good chance that I would actually move there and any road leading to that decision was not going to be an easy one.

I knew these things because I recognized our pattern. It usually starts with Sabrina suggesting that we do something, often something reckless or financially irresponsible. Or something like *Iowa*. This is the early game, the opening moves. I'll think it over for a greater or lesser amount of time and inevitably scrap the idea for some reason. I am very efficient at finding holes in ideas. Then there will be a long period of back-and-forth, where she'll casually emit facts about *Iowa* to tickle certain of my nerves, finding the correct time to insert a comment about *Iowa's* enormous dedication to wind power generation to get my environmentalist juices flowing. She'll make bold statements like, "Well, I'm moving to *Iowa* and you can just stay here if you like," usually wearing her best poker face. Not quite ready for divorce, this will inspire me to start doing research on the issue at hand. I'll start looking at towns in *Iowa* on Wikipedia. I'll begin examining weather data to see what it will be like in the dead of winter, the height of summer, the rainy season, the snowy season. Population. Median income. She knows I will do this and it must frustrate her to also know that I will eventually come around to her way of thinking, but it will take some time. She manages to scrape together enough passive-aggressive patience for me.

We will hunt for real estate in our future town. She'll do this without me most of the time (It's her Sudoku.) and then save the gems to serve as persuasive pieces in our game, stimulating emissions to add to the atmosphere of enticement. After all, the only person more stubborn than me, is she. A tarot reader used the term "diplomatic" to describe Sabrina, five times. In one reading. He also sold medicinal marijuana out of his house and subsequent visits revealed that the tarot had been torpedoed in favor of kush.

The mid-game will be in full swing by this time and one or both of us will have been looking for work in our town-to-be. I shudder when I imagine what this process would have been like without the internet. Surely this is why many people just stayed where they were: it was so damned difficult to go anywhere else.

We just happen to be lucky enough to live in a place and time in which mobility is somewhat encouraged. Celebrated, even.

This continues for an unpredictable amount of time. We may visit the place or not. We have been forged in the scorching fires of the sight-unseen move. Many times the apartment was just viewed in digital pictures, an act very similar to describing a photo based on its caption. Close is about all you can expect. Sometimes the city in which the apartment exists has never been tread upon by our feet. Occasionally we get burned.

The end game begins with decision time. Sometimes an end game is concurrent with a new early game, when we ditch one place for another. This part of the fun involves logistics. How will we get there? When will we get there? Will we have work lined up or not?

For most people we talk to, just the fact that we ask that third question causes them to pucker and I must admit that until I had a few moves under my belt, the idea of moving to a place I'd never been without a solid job offer was one of the most frightening things I could imagine. Saved money is crucial to our success here. I can't imagine trying to do this beneath a mountain of debt or without some liquid emergency cash to fix the car in a hurry. Keeping a family fed without a job can be a tricky business.

I frame this as a game because it's the most relateable way to describe it. It's a logistical chess match with a poker game on the sideboard. Moving a knight might include a bluff. The cards will not always be kind. The fog of war and the guile of the enemy limit decisions to what effects the near term, but the sand table has plans for the next year. Thank goodness those plans are on sand.

It wasn't always easy or fun, but it *worked* and it feels like we've become very good at it. After all, if I set foot in my new Iowa home, it will be the twelfth time we've moved in eight years.

2. Cedar Rapids, 1545 hours. A routine reconnaissance mission. Sabrina and I have journeyed to Iowa as a scouting party of two, trying to determine if there's any sense at all in making the place our home. Outside the window: the iconic Quaker Oats factory, Interstate 380, and the Cedar River from which the town takes its name, I presume.

It's a wet, cold November day and this time of year was

chosen partly out of convenience and partly because it's not a lovely time of year to be in the Midwest. The logic: don't visit during a deceptively beautiful time of year. The Mojave Desert is probably a joy in autumn. If we are still enchanted despite the unlovely season, then the place probably stands a good chance of feeling like home.

How do people ever know if a place is right for them? We probably suffer from a variation of the grass-is-greener syndrome and the novelty of any place might be enough to get us to pack the boxes. Knowing that we have this disease, we're a bit more cautious and thoughtful about where we steer the truck. It strikes me now that even with our caution and research, we still have to rely on a little bit of luck and serendipity to get locked into a place, the poker side of the chess match. You can search for the positives and negatives, make your thoroughly researched decision, and then something mysterious but retrospectively obvious slaps you on the ass.

WP

In July 2008, I was in a Sterling, Colorado hotel room, in an establishment that has had bed bugs and a reputation for snow blowing in under the doors. The place would've made the perfect movie setting for my mood. Newly separated from my wife, I was working for the railroad then and I'd just taken a train from Denver, spending the majority of the trip trying to focus on helping my engineer get the thing over the rails safely instead of what I wanted to do, which was sit in an empty room and cry. I kept looking across the cab to see if he could notice that I was an emotional wreck, but there was no acknowledgment. Just two dudes and 126 empty railcars going back to Wyoming for more coal. Glorious catharsis came when the door to my room clicked closed behind me.

That summer, I learned to adjust by taking miles-long walks on the weekends. I'd stroll out of my uptown Denver rental, get a couple slices of pizza and a cream soda from Two-Fisted Mario's downtown, and walk the summer evenings away, thinking about what to do next. It was amazing. After the initial pain of the divorce came the euphoric clarity of freedom and independence, the lifting of metaphorical weight. In a couple of months, I was ready to date again.

Among the pre-internet actions that now seem

impossible: dating. Personal ads were a thing for a good long while, but before that? Speed dating? Blind dating? People were probably just less picky. A more tolerant people. It certainly couldn't have been any easier then.

I would have just been a bachelor for life. There are certain things a person shouldn't have to compromise on: smoking, drugs, children, age, life philosophy, religion...there are more. All of these things can be sorted out with a few emails, or even in a quick scan of an online profile. Nobody needs to spend a single moment of their time getting to know someone who will ultimately never work for them, had they just known up front that this person, say, liked to carry a garden gnome with her wherever she went, taking pictures of it in front of local landmarks.

The dating began and even with the ability to rule out the glaring incompatibilities, the process requires fortitude. I took one woman on one of my long walking routes, which proved an unwelcome test of her endurance. The gnome lady was a real person. The flipside of being able to eliminate prospects as you wish is that with online dating, you can also selectively *allow* for things you wouldn't normally consider.

I'm not a kid person. I've never produced any and I don't want any of my own. I like children just fine, we probably get along better than many people, but I've just never had that parenting urge. Finding a woman in her late twenties who shares this outlook is *tough*. This is how I ended up considering people who already had the parenting out of their systems, so to speak. One lady was a lovely mother with a daughter of 11, savvy enough to come up with good answers to a fun little questionnaire I'd developed for the people I was courting. Sabrina.

We emailed a few times in early November and had our first date by the middle of the month. I could walk her everywhere and she didn't mind. I found out that she was very good at billiards and that she really didn't like death metal. I was looking forward to seeing her home.

She had already seen my place, *far* earlier than I had planned. Our first date was a brunch downtown which ran longer than expected. We wanted a walk afterward but I needed to get home to sort out some work business with the railroad. The question then became: *Do I ask this woman, who I've only met hours ago, to come up to my apartment?* My building had a

lobby, but it felt rude to just station her there while I performed some mysterious negotiations with my employer.

In the end, I left the option to her, saying it might be ten or fifteen minutes on the phone, and if she wanted to come up and wait in my place, she could. I'm non-threatening enough that she wanted to come see it. I prefaced this by telling her that I don't have a whole lot of stuff, that the place might seem a bit spare. Meanwhile, there's a dialog running through my head: *Shit shit shit shit. I'm not ready for this yet. I hope I remembered to clean.*

The truth was that I was newly rid of a truckload of things, given to my ex in the split. I took it as an opportunity to purge myself of all sorts of things that I didn't really want or need. Purge before change: you will see this theme again. The place wasn't a hermitage. A quick inventory of my one-bedroom place: a nice tomato-red couch with a coffee table, a lovely cafe-height dining room set for two, a small shelf with more than a prudent amount of books about trains, my guitar equipment, a desk for my computer in the metal-with-glass college-student style, some art on the walls. Some of it good, even. In the bedroom, my mattress wasn't on the floor (Although I'd do that now, whatever that tells you.), there was a nightstand and a dresser. There were some questionable decorating choices but I keep a clean house, so nothing embarrassing was anywhere to be seen. I will never forget Sabrina's first words. In a tone of relief, *Oh, it's just simple.*

What a day.

WP

In time, Sabrina became confident enough to show me her house and introduce me to her daughter Macole. It was Thanksgiving morning and she invited me to come over to see her place, and then again after work to eat. I was working afternoons, so I wasn't able to be there for the big feast.

Before walking in for the first time that day, I must confess that I was nervous not only to meet her daughter, but also because I would be able to tell much about Sabrina from the way she lived. Perhaps I'm judgmental about (everything) living quarters, but if I walk into someone's place and it's messy, smelly, and cluttered, we're probably not going to work out. I'm a neat person. I need to be with someone who picks up their

things, cleans up their messes, and knows when to get rid of things. Virgo-born, this man.

She came to the door at my knock and I stepped into a warm house that was clean, well-kept, and smelled like Thanksgiving dinner. Cookies wouldn't have done any better at preparing the air for a good first impression. The place wasn't empty, to be sure, but it was well-appointed and tasteful. Meeting the pre-teen Macole was a similarly easy experience, with a brief hello and neither of us quite knowing what to make of the other. She was polite in the presence of a stranger, something I've noticed about her ever since, which speaks volumes about the way her mother has raised her.

Returning after work that night, I ate delicious leftovers. I don't need a woman who can cook for me. I think it's wonderful if someone just heats up a microwave dinner with the intention that I'll eat it. That Sabrina can make delicious food and then give some to me, well, Thanksgiving delivered.

On it went. We dated. We went places and did things. It took me a little over a month before I was ready to kiss the woman, which drove both of us a little crazy. That kiss sealed the deal, though, and I was over at her place many nights out of the week, coming over to visit and stay, only to wake up with her early in the morning and go home for a nap before going back to work that afternoon. Not being on the same schedule really didn't affect things for too long, since I was furloughed in January of 2009 as the recession finally found me. This left me with all kinds of time to spend with my new lady and I think we were both very grateful for it.

So much of our time was spent together, in fact, that it required very little thought or adjustment to make the next step. *Do you want to move in with me?* Yeah! That was about it. I was spending most weeknights at her place and she was spending quite a few weekends at mine. Although if you ask her today, she'll tell you that she just really wanted someone to pay half of her mortgage. Even though that part of the deal was my idea. She's a fun lady.

Calendar time from first date to move-in was about three months, but relationship time was far greater, owing to my near-constant presence in her home once I was no longer working. I needed the change, frankly. A lease was broken and another purge was begun. Her house was already fully appointed, so I didn't need to bring much of anything with me. I took my dining

room table and chairs, which I really liked, but those just ended up in Sabrina's garden shed for about a year before I got tired of working around them all the time and sold them off. As before, there was the great feeling of shedding possessions, but this time it was in conjunction with the start of a great relationship.

WP

The adventures of this book are not primarily motivated by our relationships to our material goods, but those goods played a pivotal role in how our travels have unfolded. Had I been tenaciously attached to the stuff of my apartment, there would have been more friction during the move. It may not have happened at all.¹ The ability to correctly identify the things that matter, the items in my life that actually make a difference has been a boost during times when the stress might otherwise have kneecapped me.

There is an incalculable distance between the act of packing up and driving a moving van yourself, and the process of needing to hire a tractor-trailer with a moving crew to pack, load, and transport all of your worldly possessions, all the while worrying about if they're breaking the plates. I trust that there are many folks out there who have had the blissful experience of the one-car move, that day when someone leaves the house for the first time, headed for a college dorm somewhere. The day you roll out of a military barracks for the last time, headed for your first apartment in another city. A car, perhaps a 1974 Volkswagen Beetle, is crammed with everything you own and then simply driven away, a brimming rack of CD's wobbling diagonally in the rear view mirror. Nothing gets left behind that can't be mailed to you and nothing is chucked in a storage unit when you arrive at your destination. I love the beauty of that, the ideal to which I aspire. I want to be the Mongolian Yak herder, yurt packed and ready for the next dusky meadow.

3. Two things stand out about 2009. First, Sabrina and I got very serious. It was a great time to be in a relationship. Second, I had never been so frustrated with my work.

Up to that point, there were few things that I enjoyed like my job. Railroad work is like nothing else out there, so people typically love it or hate it. The love I was familiar with. The hate

1 *Either the couch stays or I go, woman!* -door slams in face-

was very new and unsettling to me. When I was furloughed in January, I saw it coming for some time and was enjoying the opportunity to spend time with my new lady. At first. But when you've been working steadily at full time or better most of your adult life, even temporarily being without a job is a distressing thing. On the whole, Americans are terrible at relaxing and I am embarrassed to count myself among the people who have trouble doing nothing. It's something I've been working (Ha!) on but at that time being jobless was equivalent to heresy.

Furloughs on the railroad have historically been seasonal. The low-seniority people got cut off after the winter holidays when traffic slowed. By springtime, they were recalled back to work. It was a regular part of the industry. The recession that hit in '08-'09 was an entirely different animal. No one knew they were in for 18 months of unemployment. Nobody really knew how to handle it. Many people didn't think there would be a call to return. The railroad couldn't predict when it would need the people again and it certainly didn't try to hazard a guess. It was frustrating for everybody involved and we had it easy relative to many other occupations. When the day finally came to recall people, many hundreds of them had already moved on. They were in jobs where the money and benefits weren't as good but at least the job was there all year long and wouldn't send you into indefinite exile.

I had some savings and a woman who made money enough to cover all the expenses, but it was early in the relationship and divorce has a way of making a person keenly aware of the things that might push a lover away. Things like not having regular work even if it's not really your fault. Things like hanging around the house all day without much to do. I was paranoid about that and irrationally afraid of the situation in general. The spectre of a wife-pushed-away would haunt for at least another ten years. My choice was to apply for another job within the company, a supervisory job dramatically titled *yardmaster*.

A yardmaster is a rail traffic controller. All the stress of the airline industry's similar job is there. It pays great money but *Jesus Facebooking Christ* is it demanding. The railroad sent me to a two-week training session in Kansas City and sat me down with the yardmasters of Denver to learn the craft. I'd spent plenty of time down on the ground working the rail yard over which I was mastering, so this was quite a natural fit for me. After a few

months I actually started to get good at the job. The learning curve was quite steep, but it was good money and I was working when everyone else with similar amounts of seniority was at home trying not to push *their* significant others away. Or they were off in the non-railroad world, trying to adjust to new jobs with lackluster benefits and no union protection.

For the first time in my adult life, the job started to become overwhelming. I took a leave of absence. Two weeks off with no pay on the premise that I was going to take a class, which I did, eventually. I went to the Central Rocky Mountain Permaculture Institute in Basalt, Colorado, where there was a Permaculture Design Course offered. If you don't regularly burn incense or grow your own vegetables, then you probably don't know that Permaculture is a design system for human habitation that focuses on human-scale enterprise and integration with nature. It's like a hippie summer camp. The course lasts two weeks and at the end you get a certificate. The course costs money, but you can offset some of the costs when it comes time for the course if you offer your services as a volunteer. In August, I went to Basalt as a live-in volunteer, helping tend to the homestead of the school's proprietor, Jerome Osentowski.

I needed that like a duck needs water. It was great to get out into the mountains, camp, and not worry about being on-call or the rigors of my job. It probably would have made more sense to just buy some camping gear and head for the hills once in awhile closer to home, but if I did things the easy way this book would have even less reason for existing. The volunteer time was fun and informative, and I already knew the ins and outs of the place when I took another leave in September for the design course.

There were about 20 people in the course, all camping on the site, and it was a very good experience for all involved. While many of the concepts and ideas recall back-to-the-land movements of times past, there is a new infusion of good science and time-tested trials revealing a wealth of useful, practical knowledge. Knowledge that would end up changing not only my approach to life, but also the appearance of Sabrina's house.

WP

To the best of my memory, Michael Pollan probably started it. Before I'd even met Sabrina, I had read *In Defense of*

Food: An Eater's Manifesto. By the time I was invited into her house for the first time and noticed a copy of *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* on her bookshelf, I was already neck-deep in reading about food issues, sustainability, eco-friendliness, and, well, you get the picture. There's a mold for people like me. I recall reading Rob Hopkins' *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* and being blown away by the suggestions contained therein. The idea that we are absolutely going to run out of oil, sooner rather than later, hit home. The solutions proposed to this problem were many. Permaculture was mentioned, and thus my adventure in Basalt.

Prior to my mountain getaway, a compost pile was deemed necessary to the proper functioning of Sabrina's household. This is mostly because I was usually the person slinging the trash and it struck me that I was occasionally removing trash bags that were less than half full simply because they stank of rotting food. We needed an externally-located food decomposer. We had just planted a garden out back that year, and since Colorado soil in Denver is about one step removed from a clay tennis court, compost would solve the stinky trash problem and improve the garden at the same time. I tested a couple of designs and settled on something I whacked together out of old pallets.

At night, I would notice a ripe smell coming from outside. Skunk. One night, after crawling out of bed upon detecting our visitor, I walked out onto the back porch and spotted our fragrant friend rooting in the compost pile. We, in our desire to be more sensible with food waste and improve the tilth of the garden soil, had created skunk bait. Now, I really don't mind this. Skunks are really cute but I needed to know more about them. Some quick reading revealed that skunks are almost entirely harmless but they're extremely near-sighted. If you surprise them at close range, you'll get the polecat treatment. If you make a little noise and let them know you're coming, they can escape or at least not be frightened. Also, be *very* cautious when they start stomping their front feet.

I learned a connection between two questions that were brewing in my mind. First, why was the skunk attracted to the compost? I knew skunks would eat garbage, but what is in the pile that's ringing the dinner bell? I knew what I had thrown in there and investigating the pile after a visit revealed that most

everything was still present, including things like leftover bits of fruits and veggies that I'd have thought would be gone for sure. Second, why was our compost pile remarkably free of the flies that plague other compost-makers? The answer turned out to be that the skunk wasn't there for the garbage so much as the bugs. Specifically, fly larvae. Maggots. Delicious. Skunks also can't climb much of anything taller than they are, but they're great at digging and rooting. So not only did we get an exterminator, we got a compost pile turner. We named our probably-male companion Floyd, and learned to love him. We also learned to jingle our keys or rattle something when adding to the pile at night and on many occasions I would see a furry black-and-white butt zip away upon hearing me. Always good for a smile, that fuzzy ass.

A word here about neighbors. This house was in an urban neighborhood and was half of a duplex. On the other side of the fence from the compost pile was another neighbor's house. We had talked with our duplex neighbor, Karl, about adding stuff to the pile, which he had asked to do. We gratefully accepted his offer with a briefing about what to put in there and what to leave out. We didn't know too much about Karl. We knew he liked football and grilling out on the porch. We knew he had an average car and an average girl. We took to calling him Average Karl. Karl was a good neighbor and much better than the previous renters, who used to stand outside commanding their dog Rocco to pee. He had bought the property and was renovating quite a bit of it.

Shortly after our compost contract with Karl, he approached me on the back porch.

“So I got a surprise taking out the compost last night.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. There was a skunk in there.”

“Oh, right. That's Floyd. He's harmless if you just make some noise when you come out.”

“Huh. [strange look] I don't really like skunks. Is there any way we can put up a barrier to keep it out?”

I should have told him that he could keep his compostables to himself. Instead I found another pallet and secured it to the front of the pile. We would still smell Floyd at night, but the compost mysteriously started birthing more flies. I was really enjoying

my role as skunk protein producer. I'm sure the feeling was mutual, but politics is politics.

4. We were a couple of garden greenies in the middle of the big city. Our plot was tiny and it grew great tomatoes. I learned that year just how much Sabrina liked to cook and how much she loved her house. We dreamed about improvements for the place, like adding a wood-burning stove or expanding the little garden. Sabrina really didn't have too many stipulations on what was done with the landscaping, so I put my Permaculture education to use and took to imagining what could be grown and where.

As I came up with ideas for projects, Sabrina seemed happy just to have someone around who liked digging in the dirt a bit. She didn't approve of everything I wanted to do, but left me to do enough that our small yard became a little refuge from the oddities of my railroad work.

That summer was pretty amazing. Not because we did anything particularly remarkable, but because this was a brand new relationship, going well. For the first time in my life, I lived in a house where I felt at least partial ownership. I was still close enough to work that I could employ my bicycle, which was crucial for me.

Cycling is something that fills its own chapter of my life. I've long loved it and it feeds me in a way few things do. I don't do much in the way of recreational cycling. Mountain biking in general and the act of putting on acres of Lycra to do time trials on the bike path are not how I get my miles. I enjoy using the bike to get where I need to go. Commuting is my absolute favorite way to bike. I love going out to run errands. It's simple and silly, but looking back now I can see that the only reason I was able to live for so long in a city as big and congested as Denver is because I was usually able to avoid sitting in traffic by sitting on the saddle of my pedal-powered machine. Maybe I have a little Danish in me.

It was a good life in that duplex. Not the biggest place, not the nicest neighborhood² but it was cozy and it was *home*. 2009 was a transitional year for us, and as it ended we used the winter to plan the next step.

2 Saw someone break into the neighbor's house, watched a man being pursued on foot by the police through our alleyway...

WP

The beginning of winter in Denver is when the first snow falls, calendar be damned. Usually this happens near Halloween, although September snows are not unknown. The growing season was ended by mid-October that year, the greenery whitened, predictably, by a winter storm. With the attention off the gardening, we lifted our gaze slightly to the two cars parked behind the plants. I barely used my little red Chevy Metro, but Sabrina got her Subaru out once in awhile. I'm the wrench-turner of the house and both of our chariots needed regular attention from me. Not that they were particularly cantankerous or troublesome, they were just *there*, needing oil changes and spark plug adjustments. Sabrina took the bus to work downtown most days and I had the bike, so mostly the cars were for longer trips and large grocery hauls. I would occasionally trade the saddle for a driver's seat on horribly cold days. We only needed one machine. With that realization, I called the local National Public Radio station and donated my car. It wasn't long after the tow truck hauled it away that I had a receipt in hand for a sizable tax write-off when it sold at auction.

Already the back area seemed larger without the Metro parked there, and since the only limitation to how much stuff we could plant was the size of the yard, we tossed some ideas back and forth and settled on a pair of improvements that would increase the amount of available soil. The first was to move the shed to where there had once been a car. The second idea was to carve off our half of the deck.

I was thrilled to have a demolition project which would effectively double the amount of garden space for us. I didn't want to just attack with hammer and saw, however. This was a slow, methodical deconstruction, each screw removed by hand, each board saved for re-use. Some wood was made into a new railing for the modified walkway up to the rear of the house, since the back deck also served as the entry from the driveway. Some more wood was used as a border around the new, expanded garden. The rest I stacked in the alley with a bilingual sign that read, "FREE!" It was gone the next morning.

During this time, the small changes came thick and fast. Most of them revolved around getting rid of things. I don't precisely know what catalyzed us. I had already sloughed off

many extraneous things and now it was Sabrina's turn. Pieces of furniture and electronics left the household in droves. I sold my guitar amp *and* guitar, not because I was giving up the hobby, but simply because the amp was for a gigging musician and I wanted a different guitar. In the meantime I was noodling around with Macole's unused acoustic. It would take me a little while to find suitable replacement equipment to make the dirty, noisy, amplified sounds I prefer. Sabrina shed her enormous plasma television and the entertainment center that held it. An old, functional Super Nintendo was a reluctant casualty. I donated the computer with which I played hundreds of hours of games. It was a great purge. It seemed like every weekend there was a different truck outside with dudes carting heavy things out the door. The house looked and felt different when we were done, with more space and less clutter. Easier to breathe.

Not everyone is going to be possessed by the Shedding Spirit, nor would I want them to be. Curators of museums should want to keep things, indefinitely. However, I cannot really convey how pleasurable, how soothing it can be to donate the forgotten things left sitting in a house. I love when something is put to appropriate use. The hammer that whacks things until the handle breaks. The car that rolls until the wheels fall off, then has them repaired and keeps rolling until it finally bursts into flames, Michael Bay-style, driver running away wearing a mad look of glee. The book that's read until the spine splits and chunks of coffee-stained pages begin to break free of their glue moorings. When a pair of my socks gets a hole in the heel, I will wear it upside down and put a hole in the other side before getting rid of them. Because who darns socks anymore anyway? That plasma television will be much better loved somewhere else, and should be. It cost a lot of resources to get it and it's just gagging to television the absolute crap out of someone's life.

That's how I approach the paring down of possessions. A touch of the insane makes life fun. It also, conveniently enough, makes it easier to pack everything up and move. Though Sabrina and I weren't seriously thinking about moving during much of this, it definitely left us better positioned to do so. For to move, one must pack. And to pack, one must agree to pain.

WP

One of my coping strategies for work stress turned out to be volunteering, something I had never done before. Volunteerism mostly seems a relic of a time when people could live in one-income households. I was very frustrated with the nature of the work I was doing, the constant pressure, the bad attitudes of the people under me. I chose a position which featured a working situation that would point me in the opposite direction. I applied at the Denver Public Library to help them with book circulation. It was a few hours per week that I could squeeze in between the unpredictable on-call shifts I was working. I checked in library books. Phones or radios weren't calling for my attention, people generally seemed to be in good spirits, and it was quiet. It was the balance I needed to keep from becoming angry and miserable.

You can probably guess where this is heading, so out with it: I quit my railroad job a few months after I began my volunteer work. I was gutted, but didn't see another way out of it. I had fought hard to get the job, felt the elation of being hired a little over three years ago, but then I felt something new: the irrepressible urge to get away. In the many interviews I've had since then, especially those with railroads, I've had to get creative to avoid telling them the truth: I was sincerely unhappy doing what I was doing, the only reason I bothered to do it in the first place was because I was furloughed, and giving it up meant going back to an indefinite state of joblessness that had already gone on for well over a year and didn't show signs of stopping. During one memorable interview, I conveyed the part about the furlough situation, but omitted my misery. A superintendent sat across the table with that look of fake disbelief that managers sometimes get when they are either very condescending or quite transparent about their dislike for you, and said, "But returning to work was all but a certainty, wasn't it?". The railroad is the only industry I know where laying somebody off for a year and a half, with no information, no prediction of the end, is then followed by disbelief and even disdain for those who are driven away by such practices and don't return when the mothership calls them back home. What a douchebag. I wasn't offered that job.

I was also beginning to form a pattern in my work history that would haunt me for many years. It looks like I start

working just fine, but when there's difficulty or things begin to change and get rough, I just walk away. That is dangerously close to the truth sometimes, something that I've only really become aware of as I write these words. It makes me uncomfortable knowing that I might be a person who just runs from any sort of conflict or discomfort. I've certainly faced my share of problems and challenges. I haven't had everything handed to me. Despite this, I come away from this realization feeling a bit spoiled and immature. At some point I began to notice that jobs are expendable, most of the time. Your health, your sanity, your relationship with your family: these things are precious. If something threatens these valuables, these family jewels, if you will, you must protect them. The trick is knowing when to flinch.

At any rate, we kept on with our strange approach to life. After one too many repairs we sold Sabrina's Subie and replaced it with an awesome, inexpensive, little blue 2008 Toyota Yaris, paid for in cash. For me, the big change was replacing what was once my dream job with three other jobs. These were chosen deliberately for their alignment to my budding new philosophies about life and the world: a job as a shop tech with Denver's first bicycle sharing program, a job with the Denver Public Library shelving books, and last was as a "working-share volunteer", tending a plot of land in the city that grew produce as part of a community-supported agriculture(CSA) program. They didn't pay me in cash, but in a share of the produce that they grew, which was what most of my pay would have bought anyway, so that was a win.

I traded hours stewing in the yardmaster's chair for hours on my pedals. Athletes might scoff, but I was logging over 80 miles every week pedaling to my various tasks. After tens of thousands of miles and about nine years of hard riding, I donated my well-worn mountain bike to a shop that shows kids how to build their own bikes. It would be stripped for parts and rebuilt into a machine for someone who otherwise couldn't afford one. I used my newly-learned bike mechanic skills to build a much better machine that I'm still riding as of this writing, many miles later. I was working pretty much every day of the week, though usually not eight hours at a time. Still, it was with great relief that I was able to cut down to my favorite of the three, schlepping books around the library. This would carry me through the winter.

Sabrina's adventures in employment were no less interesting. She worked in the always-unpredictable insurance industry and made good money doing something she really didn't like, but was nonetheless very good at, a situation to which I had no problems relating. After some rumination, she decided that the pay wasn't making up for the annoyance. On the very day that she handed her resignation letter to her boss, it was handed back to her with the suggestion that she wait until after the day's meeting. That meeting would be about the closure of her office, with transfers to Connecticut for those who wanted it and a layoff for those who did not. Instead of a resignation, Sabrina was gifted with unemployment compensation at the beginning of 2010. Her boss gets rockstar points for this subtle, yet profound action. For a woman who had worked since the age of 15 and raised a child alone for most of that time, this was the best gift in the history of gifts. She rekindled a love for cooking, being blessed now with the time to do it at her leisure. In addition to being one of the primary beneficiaries of her culinary pursuits, she spent lots of time with me when I was home, helping me deal with the the parts of my job that I inevitably brought home. It was compensation without pressure for her, the ability to collect on a fund that she'd paid into for half her life.

No discussion of unemployment is complete without a mention of laziness, the specter of the Protestant work ethic, of sloth. Most Americans who read the above paragraph will have already begun to reflexively dislike Sabrina a bit. For some reason, when people are granted unemployment compensation and those people collect it, unless they are hell bent on immediately returning to the workforce it's as if they are stealing from everybody else. For reasons equally mysterious, people who collect social security compensation after they retire are never subjected to the same scrutiny. If I pay into a benefit fund, when the time comes for me to use it there shouldn't be any sidelong glances. Are there people who milk the system? Of course. There are also plenty of checks against fraud built into it and being on unemployment is no picnic, if only for the social stigma. It's like having herpes: pretty much harmless and forgettable, but announcing your status in public might get you put into a special colony. I'm sure there are people who look at social security recipients with the same sort of malice (Republicans?) but those people are just as psychotic as pitchfork-wielding herpes chasers.

This delightful detour into the realm of sexually transmitted infection comes as a contrast to the way Sabrina wore her unemployment. It was with the grace and joy of a person who knows exactly how much something is worth. It was elegant, really. Once in awhile, people do get what they deserve. When it happens to someone you love, it's miraculous.

A lesson in how to handle unemployment is one of the most important to learn for just about everyone, particularly those who move around. The ability to stay calm and focused when your income changes or evaporates can preserve your sanity when you need it most. Sabrina takes to this naturally. I, despite my wishes, do not. My bid for yardmaster was taken after only about one month of being without work, and this while receiving a stipend from the Railroad Retirement Board, which offers a small sum to furloughed railroaders.

This illustrates why the unemployment moocher is just another version of the welfare queen: both are stereotypes that will fit a few folks, but for the most part people aren't moochers. Most people don't like being unemployed, even if they're getting money for it. This is partly because the money really isn't all that great and doesn't last all that long, but I suspect it's primarily because of the misgivings people begin to develop about a person who's on the dole. Learning how to live with these realities when a job is lost will keep you out of a bar, on your feet, and happy as a clam without regular work. Most of us will lose a job for one reason or another. Maybe you're just a Millennial. Luck might not be with you. Wanderlust and curiosity will get the better of you. No matter the reason, odds are that we'll feel that odd mix of fear, confusion, ostracization, freedom, anger, frustration, and joy that rides the coattails of getting canned. As I continue my meandering path through life, I'm beginning to understand why I need to cultivate a coping mechanism for these feelings and why Sabrina has been so instrumental to my sanity while I've tried to do it.

5. The turmoil of our working lives formed a backdrop to a subtle, but now that I look back on it, significant pair of adventures that year. We began floating the idea of moving somewhere, the first we'd ever seriously thought of such things as a group of three.

We liked the green, college-town style of life, at least on paper, and since you couldn't touch nearby Boulder, Colorado

without half a million dollars in your pocket, we searched farther afield. We discovered Ithaca, New York and in January of 2010 decided to pay a visit. We drove around in the snow, seeing all that Ithaca had to offer. We stayed in a lovely house and watched the flakes build up outside. The car rental company even gave us a stereotypically appropriate Prius to drive around town. We traveled to the local food cooperative, where we could find all the delicious idealistic food that we like to eat. Standing on the shore of Lake Cayuga, the fingery lake that points directly at Ithaca, watching people on snowboards being pulled across the ice by giant kites and sails, feeling the wind and viewing the frosty delight that is Ithaca in winter, well, we were *cold*. A lovely town by all accounts but disqualified for crappy winter weather. Had we visited in the height of summer, we probably would have pulled the trigger on that one. A picnic in the very same lakeside spot during summer or fall would have sucked me in for sure.

Austin, Texas was another candidate and with no thought given to the time of year we flew into town during May. The town is a liberal enclave in a very conservative state full of Texans. Macole was instantly unimpressed with the hot and humid Texas springtime, as she dislikes high temperatures more than any of us, particularly her cactus flower of a mother, who was born of fire. We walked down the streets of Austin in the warm evening air, past the death metal pizza place blaring Meshuggah from outdoor speakers, my delight unmatched by my walking partners. We visited the Whole Foods flagship store and I hugged a rain barrel for sale outside.³ We visited the capitol building and Sabrina hugged a palm tree. Mockingbirds amazed us with their antics. Later research revealed that Austin's high temperatures are over 100 degrees for nearly the entirety of August, every year. Sabrina would have flourished. I would have needed a cave and a nocturnal adjustment. Macole would have needed a refrigerator. Two cities disqualified.

Materializing in the mist was a vague sense about what we wanted in a place to live. An absolutely absurd list:

1. No major league sports teams. Denver has major

3 Harvesting rainwater is illegal in Colorado due to the legal complexities of water rights. In short, it is a dry place, the rivers supply millions downstream, and upstream people have a responsibility to ensure everyone gets their water. It's far more complicated than that, but there never used to be rain barrels for sale *anywhere* in Colorado as a result.

- football, hockey, baseball, and basketball teams. The fans can be annoying, the games destroy traffic all day, and neither of us follows any of it.
2. No major military installations. Being a veteran, you'd think I'd have more leniency about this, but I also know what military folks tend to be like. If the town is the weekend party refuge for soldiers, it's not fun unless you're one of them. In some cases *even if* you are one of them. It's also a bit tiresome being surrounded by reminders of American militarism and people who pay attention to things like how the American flag is displayed.
 3. There must be access to good, clean food. This is one we still use and isn't all that absurd. I want good-tasting food that didn't poison a watershed with pesticide and fertilizer runoff while it was growing. It's discouraging how many places in this country are actually disqualified on this alone.
 4. I want rain. Colorado is an arid place, most of it in perpetual drought. Or at least it's called drought when it should be called "too many people for the amount of water that this place has". We wanted a place that was a little greener than Denver. A friend of mine once said, "People believe Colorado is green until they visit someplace green." True enough.
 5. We must be able to get around without a car. Bus service and bikeability are the two main concerns here.
 6. There must be some ingrained sense of environmentalism. The town must embrace its trees. Granola people should be welcome there. Part of the reason we chose Ithaca was because it actually had its own currency, called Ithaca HOURS. Not usable outside of town, one note was about as valuable as an hour's worth of work. When buying things from participating businesses, some of your change might come back in the form of the local currency. The idea was to keep people involved with businesses run by locals. It was the oldest and most extensive alternative currency in the United States at that time. This should give a sense for the indescribable quality we were after. It's a type of anti-establishment, alternative-thinking quirkiness that pervades the culture of a town and almost requires one to

live there before it can be felt.

7. We'd like to see as few shopping malls as possible. Neither of us enjoy a trip to the mall. Sabrina is more tolerant of this sort of thing and I've developed a sort of calm coping mechanism that helps me to withstand, for about an hour, the full-spectrum assault that is a trip to a shopping center. My irritation upon entering a mall used to be almost immediate and my mood deteriorated precipitously thereafter. I'm not proud of it. The noise, constant advertisements, booth people cutting into my conversations with my wife to sell me things I obviously don't need, the cloying stench of perfumes and masses of scented candles, and don't get me started on mall food. Then, on the outside, traffic. During the holidays, the roads within a radius proportional to mall size and city population become impassable. Even outside of the holidays, weekend trips near a mall can be interesting. Also consider that most of the stores in a mall in this country tend to be the same. There are franchise stores or regional variations on those stores that sell the exact same merchandise in pretty much all of them. I do manage to find one or two of them interesting, but if a tornado were to suck them into its vortex of howling wind and spiraling debris, rending hammer from nail and merchandise from packaging, and disgorge the remains on a muddy riverbank, my eyes would remain dry.

These are the major points. Of all these, the third stipulation is most critical. We would be forced to bend on a few of these, obviously, but we are picky people. Naive, petty, and intolerant would be another take on it, but hell, it's our game and we get to make the rules. If we can avoid things that we don't like, why wouldn't we?

The place that kept coming up with top marks was none other than Portland, Oregon. Portlanders are already nauseated by reading that sentence, since so much of what made Portland what it is has been eliminated by people just like us, making these very same decisions. *That* realization would come in due time. For now, the appeal of the city, pertaining to the above seven points runs as follows.

Portland has a basketball team. They also have a soccer team, whose fans are rabid but tolerable. It's entirely possible to

live at some distance from both of the stadiums and many people take the train to the games anyway. We were somewhat compromised by the proximity of Portland International Raceway, another sport that neither of us really gives a hoot about. We agreed that this was good enough.

The nearest major military installation is in Washington, Joint Base Lewis McChord. There aren't many military folks in town apart from the Navy's Fleet Week, which isn't all that huge and you get to see really cool warships on the Willamette River. Pass.

The town has the most comprehensive selection of organic, better-than-organic, locally-produced food I have ever seen. The lush northwest farming regions are within a short drive of the city. The people there have turned the philosophies of flower children into business strategies and made it work, which is a statement all by itself. The wine selections in grocery stores are phenomenal. There's also a very pretentious food snob culture, featuring overpriced dishes and a focus on atmosphere. I write that off as just a part of being in a city, since every large metropolitan area I've ever been to has at least a handful of these types of eateries. Whatever, the food in Portland is fantastic, both in quality and availability if not in price.

Rain. You can't talk about the northwest without talking about rain. It's like Coloradoans talking about their sunshine. If you talk to just about anyone who has been to the Pacific Northwest, you will probably hear about the gray days of endless, depressing rain. Over the years, I've noticed that people have absolutely *terrible* memories when it comes to weather. As an example, my memories of the winters in Pennsylvania are permanently tainted by the winter of 1992-1993, where school was canceled so much due to snow that we had make-up days in June. The snow piles in parking lots were still turning to water in May. So I have a very unrealistic view of what Pennsylvania winters are like.

The winter rainy seasons in Portland are recounted by residents with exactly the same drama and misrepresentation. Exaggerated claims of never seeing the sun and endless days of drips come out of the mouths of people who apparently also get seasonal affective disorder, and oh by the way, don't bother to leave the house much. After enduring drought and sucking down pounds of high plains dust for 15 years, you get the itch for some humidity. 300-plus days of Colorado sunshine (also a bit

misleading, actually) during every one of those years made us yearn to have some clouds over our heads, shielding us from the spotlight. My affective disorder is apparently in summer: anger induced by sunlight. In short, the weather up there seemed just fine to us.

Portland is near the top of most lists that rate cities friendly to cyclists. The city is both lauded and reviled for its transit projects, the former because the traffic is terrible and setting up good public transportation is an excellent way to get people off the roads; the latter because the traffic is terrible and some folks believe that buses, trains, and bikes just get in the way and make the situation worse. I side with the lauders. The bus service itself is universally praised for being both frequent and reliable, even if off-schedule when the traffic thickens with the predictable rhythms of the city. There are light rail trains sewing the region together, a streetcar system which will create debate at any Portland dinner table, and even the regional train service is better than perhaps 90 percent of the United States.

I don't know when Portland got its reputation for being odd. My sense is that it followed a trajectory similar to any place cheap enough for artists and creative types to live, while simultaneously being a place those people would actually *want* to live in. San Francisco. Brooklyn. Boulder. All of these have similar stories. Once people like Sabrina and I find out about all the energy and vitality these places tend to have, obviously we want to move there. We are two among thousands. It's not long before rents are ridiculous and what was once a sweet town with personality suddenly develops a voracious appetite for your monthly earnings.

The personality is still there once the premium is paid: San Francisco is still an amazing place, Brooklyn is beautiful and vibrant, and Boulder is the college town it's always been. It is the classic lament of gentrification. I used to be able to live here and now I can't afford to because forces beyond my control have priced me out of the game. At least, my view of gentrification is that it's primarily an economic force. There are other, more sinister interpretations that are sometimes accurate. We were not examining 1990 Portland. 20 years on, the personality appeared to be intact even if many of the artists had long since starved. By all accounts, it is a town that cares about its trees, its water, its air. It's easy to find recycling bins in public places. It is a town that the people behind Republican candidate

George W. Bush's campaign famously referred to as “Little Beirut” for all the frothing, protesting liberals walking the streets. We prefer our towns on the left side of crazy.

For all that, Portland still has shopping malls. It's unrealistic to expect that a town of this size wouldn't. What it has more of, though, is neighborhood shopping districts. Each part of town has a collection of shops where it's possible to find all kinds of things. There's a rather large shopping center encompassing two downtown city blocks. There's another quite far east of the city's center, although it's practically in Gresham, the suburb in that direction. Compared to other similar cities, there tends to be fewer malls, Walmarts, and other consumer blight in Portland. Much as I hate the mall, sometimes a trip is warranted, though I'm always grateful when alternatives abound.

Portland was looking like the place we should be. It was ticking all the right boxes. The logistics of actually getting there, finding work, and becoming permanent parts of a brand new community, those things were more tricky. On paper, our target had been acquired.

WP

2010 drifted into fall, into winter. Sabrina was enjoying her unemployment, using the time to do something she loves almost as much as cooking: going to school. A yoga teacher's training, some fitness certifications, and a master's degree were on her bucket list. I was happy to have the time to spend with my new family, working part-time with the library. On the days when I couldn't be bothered to ride my bike to work, the library provided a bus pass that I used to stare out the window for a 45-minute journey. Those days were few but invariably cold and icy. Daydreaming at window scenes is definitely my favorite way to travel when the temperature is below zero.

Our desire to head northwest was met by the practical reality that Sabrina's house couldn't come with us.⁴ We had placed the house up for sale that summer, doing some minor painting and spiffing to sweeten the deal. No one was interested.

4 It is right HERE that I wish I could insert the following sentence: *We decided to buy a mobile home, shopping around until we found a reasonably priced model that would sleep three. After spending a bit of money on it, we were ready to move about the country almost at will, living in our little caravan of joy.*

The recession that furloughed me was still being felt in the housing market. We tried another realtor during the winter, with a lower price and equally low interest from buyers. The house, quintessential symbol of the American investment in a dream, of permanence and direction, stability and prosperity, was now an anchor. Far worse had happened to many others. Getting furloughed or laid off for many people meant losing everything that required monthly payments to keep. I'm not going to pretend like this is a soul-crushing defeat for us, or that we were required to donate plasma to keep eating. Far from it. Unemployment benefits were extended by the government and we had enough savings that would carry us through just about anything we would encounter.

A word here on saving money. The best financial advice I can give to anyone is never to go into debt unless it is absolutely necessary. My next best suggestion is to save as much money as you can, all the time. I can't adequately express how helpful it's been to have liquid cash in an account, ready to replace or fix a car, buy groceries, pay for a dental exam, replace a laptop, buy plane tickets and hotels for job interviews in far away towns, and just generally be there for all the unexpected things that come up. Insurance won't always be there. When it is there, it won't always pay. It will mean that you'll need to do without things that you want. Things you want *really* bad. It will be worth the resistance, I promise.

WP

Sabrina loves Indian food. Over the years she's shared that love with me. One of the things we've searched for when canvassing the internet for information about new places to live is the presence of Indian eateries. We have gone to some absurd lengths. It was on one of our trips to the Yak and Yeti, a buffet-style place in Denver, that our anchor was lifted.

We invited Jared, Sabrina's stepbrother, to come eat with us. He hadn't really been a fixture in our lives, visiting occasionally, throwing the odd social media comment our way, but he was plenty of fun to be around. We discussed many things during that meal, starting with the nature of the restaurant itself. It was a converted Victorian home, huge and distinctive. We were eating in one of the upstairs hallways, with tables set up on the hardwood floors in all the bedrooms. The buffet was down

the stairs in what was, historically speaking, the actual dining area, with a bar where the living room would be. It made for a very unique establishment with a mean saag paneer and sweet potato masala.

The discussion rambled, as discussions fueled by exotic cuisine and bottomless cups of chai tea tend to do. We began talking about our desire to move to Portland, our inability to sell the house. During our frustrations with trying to sell it, our impatience and restlessness made foreclosure look like a good option. The housing market was in the toilet for sellers and the chances of Sabrina being able to recoup what she had invested in our half of the duplex were very slim. Either no one was buying or they couldn't get a loan.

Jared had always expressed his love for Sabrina's house and had a lease ending in the near future, so he made a proposal. If we were going to move to Portland, he could rent her place when we left. It was a generous offer which benefited us all. Sabrina wouldn't need to foreclose, Jared would be getting a place he enjoyed, and we'd go to Portland, housing market be damned. As we wrapped up dinner, we promised to think about it and let him know.

We really liked the idea. It was difficult to see any downsides to having someone we knew in the house. We would need to tell him that the house would probably be sold eventually, but of course if he was in the market we would obviously sell it to him first. Sabrina and I liked the idea of being able to help Jared, and not being reduced to foreclosure was almost a side benefit.

The decision was made to move northwest. We came to a verbal agreement with Jared about rent, which offered no financial benefit beyond just paying the mortgage. Bad enough to pay interest to a bank, let alone charging it to people you know. Any utilities would be his to cover. With that settled, we had a move to plan.

WP

When I left my job, I remember being very aware that I was doing it in the middle of an economic recession. Even then, that was the word people were using: *recession*. The wisdom of such an act is questionable. If that was questionable, then relocating to a more competitive job market where the

unemployment rate was higher was stupid. My feelings about this are simple to relate.

The football stadium near the house was always filled on game days, even during the lowest of the lows, when unemployment rates were high and retirement funds were junk. The tickets with which asses were filling seats go for hundreds of dollars each. People didn't seem to actually be doing anything different apart from buying fewer homes. Stores were still packed with shoppers, which may actually be more of a statement about American financial sensibilities than the state of the economy, but there you have it. In response, I believed that the dramatic descriptions of hardship caused by the collapse of the housing market were most certainly overstated and that there would be no trouble finding work when we got to Portland. Denver was actually a pretty good place to be during this time, somehow well-insulated from the worst effects of whatever the hell was actually going on.

Indeed, there were plenty of jobs available in Oregon when conducting online searches for work. We sent out a few feelers, applying for a handful of positions to test the waters. Rejections came back, almost universally. We began to use this as a way to strengthen our resolve to move, reasoning that employers wanted to hire locals instead of out-of-towners. We were moving up there, job offers or not, telling ourselves whatever we needed to hear to make it happen.

Of immediate concern was the amount of stuff that needed to be moved and getting Macole set to transfer to her new school. The latter was a matter of finding our landing spot and talking to the appropriate administrators. The former would be a little less bureaucratic, a bit more visceral.

Deciding where to move without ever having been there is a risky choice, slightly mitigated by the advantages of online information. If you want to know what a neighborhood looks like, Google Maps becomes your tour guide. Take it down to Street View and move around the place for yourself. You can't get a complete picture, but the fact that you can get a picture at all is amazing. What's that? Is that a highway right next to my apartment building? Over there is a roofing tar distributor. Oh, look: a neighbor who disassembles cars in his driveway. Smells and sounds are difficult to detect, but there are usually clues. Temperature requires a visit to the National Weather Service website for records and averages.

Then there is the problem of finding a rental agency that will rent to you sight-unseen. Sure, there are pictures available to look at, but it's a leap of faith. Don't ask me why rental companies won't rent to folks from out-of-town. Perhaps they are doing their bit to keep the city from gentrifying. But if I've given up my first and last month's rent and signed a contract, who cares where I'm moving from? You have my money and my word. It can be tricky. Not everyone is an honest tenant. Our apartment of choice was situated along a few bus lines and was walking distance to a local food co-op called People's. We wouldn't need a car to get around if we did it correctly.

Quarters procured, we set to the task of putting things in order for Macole. Sabrina did most of the heavy lifting here, talking with Denver Public Schools and Portland's school district to figure out what needed to be done. Our move was timed with spring break, which allowed us to transfer her as seamlessly as possible, from the standpoint of curriculum. Macole is a quiet person but she makes friends quickly enough, and though she was sad to leave Denver she was excited about going someplace new, if a little nervous. Weren't we all.

We had a place to land and a school for the young one. The next thing we did was look around at all of our belongings and imagined them in the back of a moving truck. Then we envisioned the process of putting it all in there. I think this is the point at which many people begin to hate moving. We had already pared down a bit, selling some of the heavy and bulky items that would have seriously hampered our moving efforts.

Then, in an act that earned hero points, Sabrina started going through her things. I mean *really* going through her things. Pieces of furniture, old movies, a huge box of photographs, two large plastic tubs filled with treasured costumes (Halloween is sacred to her), and so much else. She resolved to get rid of an enormous portion of it. I felt almost guilty, as if my previous purging had coerced her into getting rid of all her stuff. During the apartment-hunting process, I learned that she had never actually lived in an apartment before. She had been able to live in or own a house for her entire adult life and the switch to a much smaller space would mean that having four bedrooms' worth of possessions might not be a practical thing. I reminded her of this, not realizing that it even needed mentioning. My life was one of small spaces that were never my own, always with an eye on mobility: straight out of my bedroom in Hokendaqua to

barracks rooms, a studio apartment in Denver's Capitol Hill, two small places downtown in earshot of weekend revelers and the resulting gunfire, and the one-bedroom residence from which I came to live at the Hooker house. The compact nature of my home life had been accepted a long time ago. I felt like I was almost harassing the woman with this new paradigm. How little I knew of Sabrina then.

A truck was summoned from a local charity and they arrived to pick up a front lawn full of donations. Macole was set upon by the two crazy adults in the house, foaming at the mouth to be rid of excess stuff that would need to be boxed and lifted. The reality was actually just Sabrina telling her, "Go through your closet and pile up what you don't need anymore." It would take a few more years for me to get closer to Macole, so she probably thought I was the asshole boyfriend who made her mom give away her stuff. She dutifully did as she was asked, parting mostly with old clothes. If she thought me a butt, she never showed it. We've always had what I consider a good relationship here in our unconventional little family unit. We were as compact as we could be, for the time being.

6. The open-plan living room was a warehouse: stacked boxes spilling into the adjoining dining area, plastic storage bins full, the smell of cardboard. Some containers sat open and half-loaded, contents still undecided. Some items defied containment, sitting instead against walls and in the open: a sofa, a swivel chair, a pedestal fan. The main floor became the default accumulation area for all things movable. Our neat and ordered place became cramped and clumsy. It was the home of a family in transition.

This wasn't our first trip together as a family, but it was our first relocation. I began to learn the purpose of the large bins I had dodged for months in the garden shed. When I moved, I scrounged for boxes from work, liquor stores, and just about any place that had them lying about, unsecured. Sabrina had met the need with these big, gray tubs. She had moved many times before and the plastic bins were years old, having assisted in many a move, graffiti covering the lids and sides with notes about contents or durability. They would serve us well for many moves to come.

Years later, in a visit to one of Sabrina's college friends in Grand Junction, Colorado, we were talking about moving. He

too had been afflicted with the wanderlust. Perhaps it was something in the water. The Junction locals will tell you the stuff in the water is actually just uranium leachate from an old mill.⁵ He opened up the door to the second bedroom of his apartment and there sat stacks of these bins. It is a testament to a person's maturity and boring dorkiness the amount of excitement a plastic container can generate. My maturity on full display, I lit up and exclaimed my enthusiasm for such a wonderful way to perform such a mundane task. This was followed by the rest of the dorks in the house also expressing their approval for this marvel of modern storage engineering, the storage bin with snap-on plastic lid, available just about everywhere, for not that much money. I probably ought to seek a sponsorship.

WP

Not quite the vernal equinox, 2011. We had been spending a few nights huddled around the laptop, planning our route to Oregon. From Sabrina's home on the west side of Denver to our new home on the southeast side of Portland was 1,286 miles. It's difficult to imagine the scale of such distances in the abstract. It would take about 19 hours. We planned on it taking a bit longer, since a moving truck isn't known for its speed or comfort. With that in mind, we mapped a route that would include a few stops. We weren't in a terrible hurry and figured we should enjoy the trip, such as it was.

We planned on driving west, straight into the mountains, heading for Grand Junction first. This might be our last chance for awhile to see friends who lived there, so we would spend the night and do a little visiting. Then it was on to Salt Lake City for a night. On the third day, we would head for Idaho and take rest in Boise. Day four was a trip into the Blue Mountains and a night in La Grande, Oregon. From there we would amble our way into Portland on the last day.

The route was partially planned based on the availability of good food at each stop. This would not be a caravan that stopped at the local greasy spoon or the nearest burger joint when the first tummy growled. We would pack quite a bit of road food in the cab of the truck with us, but we were going to get

5 Not a joke. The town had a uranium enrichment facility right on the banks of the Colorado that wasn't cleaned up until the late 1990's. It was a source of supply for the Manhattan Project.

good, clean, hot food where we could. Also a factor in our trip calculations was the amount of driving time. Sabrina was our main driver, with Macole and I rotating out between the middle “seat” and the passenger's side. That arrangement is okay for about six hours. After that, the truck is filled with three cranky people and things get less fun.

I should mention that even with the money we would spend on gas, food, and hotel reservations, we were still coming out far ahead of what it would cost to hire movers to do the packing, loading, driving, and unloading, in addition to buying plane tickets for ourselves. I still see enough professional moving services on the roads to know that when I say, “We're moving,” there are many people who have a very different image of that experience than what it is I'm actually trying to convey. When people balk at the imagined cost of the many moves we've undertaken, they're not wrong. They just have a larger figure in their minds than we actually spent. One of our moves typically costs about the same as a domestic family vacation. The shorter moves cost much less than that.

On that subject, we had a car to think about. It had been decided that our little blue Yaris would not be coming with us. We had bought it scarcely one year prior. It was a great little car. We were moving to a place partly chosen because we'd be able to live without a vehicle. With that decided, we found a buyer, and for the first time in a long time we were living as carless humans.

WP

Moving day arrived. We walked the mile from the Hooker house to the truck rental place. We settled on a mid-sized moving truck, about 17 feet long. Driving the beast back to the house, I was still a little concerned about how it would all fit, a trait that would follow me for pretty much all the other moves we would make. We had plenty of time to make it work, packing one day and leaving the following morning. Sabrina backed the truck onto the concrete pad in back of the house, where our little blue car had once been, where *all* our cars had once been, and we rolled up the back door.

One by one, piece by piece, each thing went from living room clutter to cross-country traveler, nestled in the truck. Sabrina gets frustrated with me but I enjoy doing this part and I take my time figuring out the best place for everything. Weight

distribution, fragility, ease of access should we need to pull something out, all of these are concerns I have in addition to just making everything fit so that it doesn't bounce or slide around. It's truck Tetris and it's fun. Sabrina keeps me in check by wanting to load everything as fast as possible, staring daggers at me while I stroke my beard and stare at odd sized boxes, imagining all the nooks and crannies I could fill with them.

My sacred tire inspection ritual took place shortly after loading. It's a good thing, too, since most of the tires were under pressure by a few pounds and one of the rear tires was quite low. About 30 minutes of pushing away on the bike pump and I was confident that we'd be getting the best mileage we could out of the truck, although that mileage probably wouldn't be great.

Then it was done. Everything fit in the boxy vehicle with room to spare. We walked through the house, checking all the closets and drawers, trying to pick up anything we might have left behind. We hopped on a bus for an Indian food dinner.

The night before a move, you have a chance to lie down in bed and think about the journey ahead. You also end up thinking about all the piddly little tasks that need doing to go from one place to another: change your address with the postal service, change it with about ten other important institutions, turn off utility service in one place, turn it on in another. I don't remember being particularly afflicted with any one thought that night, but I do remember a growing sense that I was going to miss this house, the first real house I'd lived in since leaving my parents' place back in 1998. Sabrina had only moved into the home in 2008 and loved it more than I did. She still owned it, but trading this cozy duplex for a far-away apartment would take some getting used to. We weren't planning on coming back.

Waking early, we gathered up the rest of our things and put some food in our bellies. It was March on the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains and we would be rolling straight through them on our way west. March is, on average, the snowiest month for this part of the state. Brutal spring storms have a habit for dumping feet of snow, pruning off branches and crippling the city for a day or two until the strong sunshine comes back and melts it all. One week later, it's all a memory. Such is the weather in Denver this time of year. It was with much relief that the weather forecast was free of such disturbances for our journey. Over the years, we've not always been so lucky with the mountains. All of us were a little excited and a little nervous, a

feeling which has since become recognizable on moving days, a symptom of the body transitioning into adventure mode.

7. As we climbed inside the cab of the moving truck, we tried our best to fit three-wide. The house behind us was locked up and shut down, its dormancy set to last until new occupants arrived. We gingerly shoved off, backyard receding in the mirrors, mountains in the windscreen.

This first leg, through the Rockies to Grand Junction, is right in Sabrina's wheelhouse. Having grown up in Junction, she had predictably traveled to Denver for better shopping, nicer restaurants, for friends who'd moved away. The route is direct enough. Just merge onto I-70 westbound and keep driving until you get to the Grand Valley. It's direct but hazardous.

This is a tough piece of mountain highway. No matter the season or weather, there are always quite a few crippled vehicles along the path, many of them laid low by the long, steep climbs over mountain passes. Others sit with ruined brakes from the descents down the other sides of these slopes. Large gates protect key junctions, closing when the conditions are too treacherous. Often, mountain storms appear with little warning, blanketing the roads in snow and forcing the closure of the highway as you're driving it. It doesn't matter if you have an appointment at grandma's. When those gates come down you're not going anywhere until they go back up.

Motoring through Golden, Colorado and the western suburbs of Denver, every bump attuned my ear to the cargo box, listening for things clunking around or sliding out of place. I'd been fastidious with the packing, bracing and strapping, but a bouncing truck produces forces that are remarkably good at knocking things loose. Macole has shorter legs than I do, so she was relegated to the middle seat for the initial journey, knees becoming familiar with the center console.

I need to take this time to acknowledge Sabrina's driving prowess. Her secret to professional success as a moving truck operator is that she knows that she's in a moving van. Many folks drive these trucks like they are large cars. This thing will be slow up the hills and ought to be brought down with the same caution as many larger vehicles. Stomping the gas and mashing the brake will do nothing but add you to the roadside jewelry of thrown tire treads, car parts, and hobbled vehicles. She knows that filing in behind a tractor-trailer slogging upgrade at 30 is okay. We

have plenty of time but we only have one truck. If it breaks, we're stuck in the mountains. All credit to the rental company, but this truck is not the newest, most reliable model. Many asses have been in these seats and if the tire pressures are any indication, the level of preventive maintenance this truck has received might not be the highest. So she is properly careful.

We stopped once or twice, mostly out of deference to me. I wanted to roll up the back door to see how our stuff was handling the ride. A thing or two knocked over, a strap to tighten here and there, and all the rest was in place.

On through the Eisenhower Tunnel. At 11,000 feet above sea level, it is the highest tunnel for vehicles in the United States. It is also the longest tunnel and highest point on the entire Interstate Highway system. It exists as an expedient, if I can use that word to describe the act of boring through 1.6 miles of rock. The alternative would have been to find a way to twist the road up and over the Continental Divide, no doubt requiring many more miles of pavement and an ongoing road maintenance budget that would stun the accountants. Not to mention that even from 11,000 feet, there's another 3,000 feet to the top in many places.

As we left the west aperture, we began the long descent down the mountainside, passing runaway truck ramps and getting out of the way of drivers who enjoy risking their lives. We passed Silverthorne, known to many as the location of a large collection of outlet stores, known to us as the location of Dillon Reservoir, which provides a visual indication of the severity of a drought. We like to see the water level high, lapping at the trunks of shoreline trees.

This was the front line of the pine bark beetle invasion not long ago. Severe drought and mild winters had built up during the early aughts. The combination did two things. First, the drought weakened the trees, making them more susceptible to all types of illness, beetle infestation being one of them. Healthy, well-watered trees are able to defend themselves with resin. Second, the beetle larvae can be killed by good, long periods of low temperatures. If the larvae aren't thinned by weather, they reproduce freely and the plague spreads. The beetle itself bores a small hole into the bark of the tree and tunnels just beneath it, which severely disrupts the tree's ability to feed and repair itself.

Another control on the pine bark beetle is a fire that

burns hot enough to kill them. Of these we've had enough to challenge the title to hell itself. Californians understand what it is to have a fire season, though in all fairness, more and more of my fellow Americans are beginning to understand.

In 2002, I can recall waking for work one Friday morning. The light outside my Denver window appeared diffuse and reddish. Stepping from the door of my apartment building, the overwhelming scent of pine incense was in the air. The entire city was blanketed in thick smoke, visibility less than half a mile. This was the year of the Hayman Fire, thousands of acres incinerated, and the wind was reminding us just how bad things were. Off I rode through the smoke with burning eyes, but it reminded me of pine incense that my mother used to burn. Even at midday the light was glowing sunset orange and red, eerie and strange. While there would never be another day to match that one while I lived in Denver, the wildfires continued to plague the state every year, for at least the next ten seasons. Fire is normal out here, but the ongoing drought and beetle kill had littered the forest with dry timber and undergrowth just waiting for a lightning strike or a campfire that wasn't quite extinguished. These sources of ignition were inevitably found and I learned to recognize the telltale plumes on the horizon during many summer travels.

The beetles aren't the enemy here, merely a symptom of a larger problem. Beetles are important decomposers that mostly consume unhealthy or dead trees. After the beetles are through with their work, the forest is left with stronger stock and the way is cleared for other forest plants to colonize. In this part of the mountains that primarily means aspen trees, their beautiful trunks, fragrant fiber, and vibrant fall colors coming with them. Still, my inner tree-hugger was for years assaulted with the sight of millions of dead, brown pine trees when making this journey, the low reservoir beneath them a reminder of whence the plague came. Many enterprising folks harvested the timber and sold it as lumber, making lemonade from lemons and all that. If you've ever wondered why beetle-kill pine started appearing in West Elm furniture and Whole Foods' displays, now you know. As of this writing in 2019, there are still millions of standing dead trees, graying in the Colorado sunshine. They're not as visible as they were when dead brown needles clung to their branches, but they are still there to remind us of the various phases of the forest.

WP

Past Silverthorne, we began to climb again. Past Frisco and the ski runs of Copper Mountain, the highway leads to the top of Vail Pass, elevation 10,662 feet. There's no tunnel, just a rounded summit with a highway sign to mark the apex. The climb up the eastern slope isn't as dramatic or grueling as the journey up to the Eisenhower Tunnel, since Silverthorne is already quite high in the mountains, but all of the same challenges are there.

Then we descend again, down through Avon and Eagle, past the drywall factory at, appropriately enough, Gypsum. Some miles back, we formed up next to the abandoned rails of Union Pacific's Tennessee Pass line. The rails travel almost straight for the pass just near Vail, heading through Minturn and Leadville, and eventually Canon City and Pueblo. Today they sit unused, evidence of a railroad not-quite-sure if it will use them ever again, a tantalizing object of desire for trail makers and rezoning commissions.

Past Gypsum comes Dotsero, the name supposedly from a surveyor of the area, who used the place as his "dot zero", some sort of reference location. Colorado's most recently active volcano is found here. Dotsero Crater hides in the hills near the town, its last eruption about 4,000 years ago.

A transition happens in the surrounding landscape. It is still hilly and rugged, but the vegetation and soil belie a subtle dessication. The earth takes on more sandy tones, sagebrush and red soil also in evidence. Colorado is filled with lovely ruddy rock and dust, and in the direction we were going there is less and less covering it up. The mixed pine and aspen forests of the mountains gradually give way to the desert. Cottonwoods mark the location of water, as they do in much of the state.

Amidst change there is more change, and this one is abrupt. Not far from Dotsero we entered Glenwood Canyon. For about 12 miles, the interstate attaches itself to the sides of sheer, 1,000-foot cliffs of towering sandstone, carved away by the roaring Colorado River immediately next to us. During the spring, which we were rapidly approaching, the river becomes brown and furious with melt water, covering up the river bottom with a frothing rocket of liquid blasting its way west. As we passed the river in the driest season of a dry spell, there was still

plenty of water in the canyon, but there were thousands of visible boulders and rocks in evidence. The river appears to run on a bed made entirely of these jagged protuberances, having fallen too recently for the water to have had the time to smooth them over.

It's a reminder that springtime is rock slide season. The intense Colorado sunshine melts away snow and ice, filling every crevice with liquid water. Night comes and the clear, dry night air freezes it solid. The freezing brings expansion and the rock is split and forced apart, causing some of it to give way. It's basic middle school earth science at work, its evidence all along the Colorado River's bottom, and upon a glance out our windshield and up toward the towering cliffs of Glenwood Canyon, I remember that it's still working.

The canyon doesn't get a whole lot of light during the course of a day, just a few hours when the sun is at its highest, but that's enough time for some good ol' fashioned frost wedging. Most seasons pass with news of a rockfall in Glenwood Canyon, enormous specimens of solidified ocean-bottom sand, falling from sickening heights and battering holes in the roadway below. Occasionally there are vehicles in the drop zone.

This is a really bad place to build a highway. Very, dangerously, foolishly bad. Of course the interstate was built anyway, because bad as it is, this is really the only option. The canyon is narrow enough that all four lanes very frequently do not fit side-by-side and highway engineers needed to cantilever the westbound lanes over the eastbound lanes. Those cantilevers are what take the brunt of boulder impacts. As constricting as this place is, right across the river are the rails of the Union Pacific, this time very much active and still used frequently for trains headed to Grand Junction, Salt Lake City, and beyond. There is often room for neither train nor truck and both must be tunneled through massive sections of the canyon walls to continue. Looking out the windows as we drove through the defile revealed all the tactics employed to keep the rock from paying us a geological visit: the default concrete highway barriers at the side of the road; sprayed-on shotcrete to hold the rock in place, looking for all the world as if the canyon's been stuccoed in places; giant curtains of steel chain mail draped across the face of sheer cliffs to catch whatever may fall; slide fences on the railroad side that illuminate warning signals when their wires are broken by errant rocks. Transportation is a rough

business around here.

Rough, but not impossible. We emerged at the mouth of Glenwood Canyon into sun-kissed Glenwood Springs. A person would know her arrival in this town with her eyes closed. The geothermal activity that lends the town its name and much of its livelihood also distributes upon the air the sulfuric aroma of brimstone. Sidelong glances at one another in the cab of the moving truck are accompanied by wrinkled noses until the source is realized. On the highway side of the river sits a famous hot spring-fed pool, where it's fun to have a swim in warm mineral water. There's a shallower, hotter pool that is almost always filled by older people seeking relief from joint pain. This isn't the only place to soak in town, but it's probably the most popular. On the railroad side is the Glenwood Springs passenger station, still used by one Amtrak train each way, every day. Sparse and frequently delayed service, but well worth the trip through one of the most scenic stretches of railroad anywhere and lucky that it happens in daylight.

Here in Glenwood, The Roaring Fork River makes its contribution to the Colorado. A journey south up the valley on Colorado Route 82 leads through Carbondale, the home of my Permaculture alma mater in Basalt, and eventually to the location of some of the highest property values in the nation, Aspen. Driving all the way through Aspen on the highway will take you on a fun journey up a steep mountain road that occasionally only has room for one lane. This road, though still technically Route 82, is little used and closed during the winter. Named Independence Pass, it tops the Continental Divide at 12,095 feet and according to the informational plaques there, it is the highest paved road over the Divide in the US. The pass features the ghost town of Independence, originally built in the 1800's by prospectors afflicted with gold fever. Also nearby is Mt. Elbert. At 14,440 feet, you'll need to look in the Sierra Nevada to find a taller peak, and you will find only one in the lower 48: Mt. Whitney. Water from one side of Mt. Elbert eventually makes its way to the Mississippi, passing another Independence as it goes, in Missouri. Colorado's Independence was founded on July 4th 1879, while the Show Me State named theirs after the Declaration.

Slipping out of Glenwood Springs we were solidly in country where green either means flowing surface water or high elevation. Scrubby vegetation is there but the desert is imminent.

We passed places like Chacra,⁶ New Castle, Silt, and Rifle, the last featuring a lovely little state park with, of all things, several cascading waterfalls.

I *love* the names of towns out here. There are still generic American names like Johnstown and I'm sure there's a Springfield somewhere, but for every one of those there are two with names like Nucla, Meeker, Axial, and Dinosaur. We passed Parachute, home to very little apart from a sand transload facility, where trucks take the stuff from trains and haul it to hydraulic fracturing wells in the area.

The speed limits higher, Sabrina did her best to make 75 as we zipped past the agricultural fields scattered in the Colorado River valley. Next comes De Beque⁷ and its namesake canyon. Here is a wider and shallower slash delivered to the earth by the Colorado. The railroad and interstate have traded sides, but they still hug the banks of the river, dodging rock slides and washouts as they go. The nearby waterway is noticeably larger and more powerful. De Beque Canyon is very beautiful and very much a desert canyon. Anyone who's missed the slow transition to the arid west will surely recognize the iconic shapes and forms of the landscape before them now, and missing it here just means you'll be slapped in the face by it in a few miles.

A rare sight greets travelers through this stretch of road: a dam. Rare for Colorado the state, if not Colorado the river, an antiquated roller dam sits astride the water, beginning a series of irrigation-related constructions in the area. The dam isn't large, doesn't make the river any more navigable, but its job is critical just the same. It helps make the sun-scorched land ahead of us not only livable, but arable. Twisting our way through the canyon, we rounded a final right-hand curve and were sluiced out into the Grand Valley along with the muddy waters.

Immediately before us was Palisade, its collection of fruit vines and orchards dormant for the winter but getting ready to spring to life, enabled in part by the dam we'd just passed. Grand Junction is just beyond, where we would spend the night in a hotel after visiting some friends. Junction is named for the

6 Pronounced either *SHACK-ra* or *SHOCK-ra*. I prefer the latter. People who still speak in a manner reminiscent of the frontier dialect use the former. But then they also pronounce “plateau” as *PLAT-TOO* and “Pueblo” as *pee-EB-lo*. They refer to boulders as “donies” (*dough-knees*). So there's that.

7 Pronounced *deh-BECK* and not like the town in Iowa, *at all*. We agree with the frontier folk on this one.

confluence of the Gunnison River with the Colorado, where the latter assimilates the former. Driving through Glenwood Canyon, the frisky little waterway beside the interstate doesn't seem like the force of nature that carved Utah's Glen Canyon and Arizona's Grand Canyon, keeping millions of people watered. The river is a relentless shaper. It's had the time to do it. The Gunnison has canyons of its own, most notably Black Canyon, named for impossibly steep sides that allow very little direct light into its depths.

The Grand Valley is pretty easy to spot from the air, a strip of irrigated green among endless acres of rock and sun-baked mud. Driving along I-70 toward the hotel, enormous bookcliffs took our hands and welcomed us to the desert. The iconic shapes and colors of the American frontier are everywhere in evidence. Only a saguaro cactus might be more representative of this place's imprint, but alas we were too far north.

While visiting, I took the opportunity to open the back of the truck and inspect the load. Again, everything was very well situated and I couldn't spot any casualties. Closing the door, I turned my attention to the truck. Here, upon glancing at one of the inner dual tires, I saw the head of a large bolt. Not good news. The tire appeared to be holding air and had taken us this far, but I wasn't about to be surprised when the thing disintegrates on a desolate stretch of Utah highway.

On to the local U-Haul place we went, just before they closed. They didn't have the means to fix the tire, relying instead on a local towing company to provide support for things like this. The wait for the repair truck was longer than the fix itself. The fully loaded truck was jacked up with a powerful portable lift and the repairman had a new tire installed quicker than I would have thought possible, all at no charge to us apart from what we paid to rent the truck. I actually like this better than finding nothing. Not seeing anything wrong leads my mind to horrible places. Discovering and fixing a defect reassures me that we should be just fine.

WP

The next morning, we woke early to find some breakfast. Days on the road are interesting things. When you're on road time, there's usually a schedule you'll need to keep but the time feels like it's all yours. The commitments and complications

associated with home life are not there. You are reduced to concerning yourself with food, toilet, fuel, and safety. Beyond that, the scenery slips past the glass.

Fed, we climbed back into the truck and headed for I-70, westbound. We were approaching virgin travel territory, something to look forward to for all three of us. Grand Junction is only about 25 miles from Utah, and Sabrina had been west of her hometown here enough to be familiar with some of the places we'd pass. I'd been this way only as far as Crescent Junction, where a road diverts south to places like Moab and Arches National Park. Pass those places and eventually you'll end up in Arizona, a Native American reservation, and the lovely Painted Desert. Driving further will take you to the Grand Canyon, more or less, which was my purpose for driving this way in 2004, the last time I'd been here. It was the middle of the night when I drove this area then and my most vivid memory is of very brief rainstorms filling the car with a unique aroma. The mud and wet desert, hot asphalt and sage combine to form a very distinctive scent that always reminds me of this place. I've never smelled it anywhere east of the Rocky Mountains, nor in places too far west for that matter. It's part of the regional charm that American homogenization has not assimilated.

Crescent Junction came and went. Salt Lake City was on the itinerary, a place I'd only seen in pictures. We were about 200 miles away and the drive promised to be scenic. For those who've never been to Utah, their state highway signs use a peculiar symbol to denote the route number. Pennsylvania uses a keystone shape, Colorado uses a small, colorful state flag, and Washington uses a profile of the president himself. Ohio went with an outline of the state borders, which distorts into a more portly Ohio when the routes require three numbers. Utah uses a lumpy pyramid with a hole in it. It's actually a beehive, apparently chosen because bees are industrious and hard-working. It reminds me of a hogan, one of the traditional structures used by the Navajo people.

Not far beyond Crescent Junction, we approached Green River and the end of our acquaintance with I-70. After crossing the town's namesake waterway we diverted northwest on US 191 and made our way into more mountains. The Wasatch Mountains were in our path and 191 gives travelers a way through them. There were traces of green everywhere around us in the upper reaches of the jagged peaks of the lovely hills. We were in

Carbon County. There's coal in them thar hills. Many trainloads of it have passed this way, many miners have lived here. Coal mines are in evidence everywhere, from black streaks on a hillside to operating industries busy with their extraction.

I hadn't intentionally chosen a route based on how many iconic railroad routes I would encounter along the way, but it certainly seemed like it. This is still Union Pacific's area of operation, but the Utah Railway, based in nearby Helper, Utah is a major player as well. Passing Price and Carbonville, the walls of rock around us began to close in with the familiar embrace of mountain passes the world over. Then we arrived in Helper.

The town was allegedly named for the locomotives that are added to trains for extra muscle in the mountains. Helper locomotives are usually added at the bottom of a grade, help haul a train to the top, and then can be uncoupled and run back down to help another train, or they can help hold the train back as it rolls down the other side, using dynamic brakes.⁸ Those locos need a place to refuel and get service, and the crews who operate them need a place to report to work, to live. Helper is just such a place. The hill that needs climbing, whether by road or rail, is Soldier Summit and the tracks of the former Denver and Rio Grande Western would be very near to us on the way up.

A second traveling companion would be the Price River. The frothy brown waters were visible approaching Castle Gate, a symbolic entry to Price Canyon. The Price isn't nearly as dramatic or powerful as the Colorado, but it has carved itself some rock just the same. Meltwater was making it swell a bit, but it's a shallow, timid thing for much of the year.

Castle Gate was, at one time, a geological feature of stunning impact. When the railroad was the only player in the canyon, there were two immense pillars of sandstone, one on either side of the River, standing watch over the opening. It appeared as if the mountains were opened by some deity, offering this portal for humanity. When the highway was built, the people responsible for its construction chose obliteration. Now there's one half of the gate and the opening is still impressive, but these are the kinds of things that can't be rebuilt. It was demolished for a road. Instead of Castle Gate, we were left with Castle Decrepit Saloon Door. I would rather take a

8 A braking system that wouldn't have been present on the steam locomotives used during the time when Helper was named. Modern diesel-electrics are as useful on the way down as they are on the way up.

longer route and have the gate still standing, but perhaps my inner rock-hugger is showing. My middle finger definitely is.

Ecological fervor aside, two things happen at Castle Gate: first, US 191 diverts northeast into rugged terrain, state lands, and Native American country. We've been on US 6 since exiting I-70, but who can keep track? Second, we could see the other end of the mining spectrum as we rolled by a power plant situated along the Price. The coal trains have a destination here.

The rocky magnificence of Price Canyon was everywhere. It is a lovely mountain pass that, questionable construction decisions notwithstanding, I was happy to be able to drive through. Sabrina twisted and turned her way toward the top just as the railroad does, winding and bending its way around and through the mountains. We got closer and closer to green vegetation and then we were at the top, Soldier Summit.

Compared to the other mountain passes we'd been over, 7,477 feet isn't very high. In the high desert, though, the general rule that elevation changes bring significant weather differences still applies. The mountains reliably encourage the air to let go of water even in a place like this. Most places around Soldier get less than 10 inches of precipitation per year, but the soft, rolling hills around us were alive with green peeking out from under snow. It's not a forest, mind you, but after hundreds of desert miles the verdure of the place got a nod. Soldier Summit is a broad, sweeping valley with rolling mountain tops, evoking my memories of the Appalachians. Minus the trees.

The road tipped over the top and we began our careful descent of yet another mountain grade. Tucker. Thistle. A symphony of names. One expects to round a corner and read road signs:

Killaman
Population: 7

South of Heaven
No services.

And it's not just the towns. We had lost the Price River many miles ago. The White River was beside us for awhile until we made the summit. Then it was Soldier Creek, which assimilated Starvation Creek and Clear Creek. Indian Creek and Tie Fork added their waters. The Mill Fork sloshed in just past Mill Fork

Road. Dairy Fork and Sheep Creek made their contributions. The Lake Fork wasn't far past those. Then it was the confluence with Thistle Creek and the waterway earned a new name: Spanish Fork.

There's the feeling that in a place as dry and desolate as this, the water gets more attention than it might, say, in the Pacific Northwest. Each little tributary and branch earns its place in our world with a new name befitting its unique personality, or perhaps just indicative of the folks who lived or died by it. It's part of what I love about it out here. Sometimes I ache to be soothed to sleep by the sounds of a good, steady rain outside, a sound that is terribly rare in Colorado, in Utah. There's always a trade to be made and aridity is a price paid for solitude, open spaces, and a visceral sense of connection to water.

On a recent trip home, my mother was able to pick up on that connection. I was doing the dishes using a method Sabrina had shown me years ago. The dish-doer finds, in the pile of dirty dishes, something that will hold a fair bit of water: a large bowl, a saucepan, a plastic tub. This gets filled with soapy water and set into the sink. When soap is needed, the washcloth is dipped into the soap reservoir and used to wash whatever is in hand. Rinse water is directed away from the soapy water, keeping it cleaner and more effective. I do this even in sinks with two bowls. It's very efficient. A tiny supply of detergent, kept pure as possible, will wash a huge amount of dinnerware. Upon seeing this, my mother first got an incredulous look on her face and asked what I was doing.

“I like doing them this way. It keeps the soapy water longer.”

“I can tell you come from a place where water is an issue.”

It doesn't stop with dishes. Toilets aren't flushed as often in my house. If it's yellow, leave it mellow.⁹ Our home doesn't smell like a porta-loo, but we probably use half the flush water of many families, saving hundreds of gallons of drinkable water

9 Upon uttering this phrase to a coworker, he was appalled at my apparent lack of concern for hygiene. No matter how much I insisted that it was perfectly sanitary and that we weren't cultivating fecal coliform, he didn't seem anxious to start saving water himself. There are psychological barriers here.

in the process. It's *always* a drought year out here. Even after a big rainstorm, even during seasons with “normal” amounts of rainfall, it is always the best course of action to treat water as if it were scarce. It *is* scarce. Scarce and precious, everywhere. I will win any argument about this.

On the outskirts of Spanish Fork, we were greeted by something I certainly never expected: enormous wind turbines situated right at the mouth of the Spanish Fork valley, evidently to help power an industry set up there. When life hands you steady winds, make electricity. They would not be the last turbines passed on our journey.

It's not too much farther that we came upon Provo and Salt Lake City. The transition from open desert and mountain canyons to bustling, busy metropolis is a bit jarring, but even here on our first family journey, Sabrina's driving skills were more than a match for a little traffic. We navigated the busy streets to our hotel and set about finding food.

Salt Lake City is a jewel. It is a clean, modern city with some of the most interesting highway designs I've ever seen. Forgive me, but I've taken to calling them “Mormon interchanges” and “Mormon intersections”. This is out of reverence for the unique and efficient methods the people in Utah have devised for getting two roads together. Or apart. Or just next to each other. Perhaps such things didn't originate here, but they did for me. Anyone accustomed to driving on the east coast will be in awe of the fluidity traffic can have if only given enough open space to properly allow it to flow. Transportation infrastructure aside, the city is backed up by the lovely Wasatch and shares space with its namesake body of water.

The lake is another desert treasure. Anyone who's read John McPhee's *Basin and Range* (or knows more than most people about geology) will recognize this area as a basin. There's no escape from this one for liquid water. It either accumulates or evaporates. No streams run out of the Great Salt Lake. Upon evaporating, the water leaves behind its minerals and just like that a body of salt water is born. It effects the weather of the area by being a warm, shallow body of water in a dry place. One of the first things we noticed upon arriving in town was that the air had moisture in it. It can be seen, smelled, and felt. Humidity in a desert can be a welcome thing and if your lungs are like mine, you enjoy a little bit of the wet stuff in your bronchial tubes. In that desert oasis we bedded down for the night, breathing the air

of wetter lands.

WP

It was another successful leg of our 1,200-mile journey to a new part of the world. In the future, we would come this way again. The number of times this was going to occur would have been a horrible shock had we been told during that trip. I think about it now and I'm a little amazed, frankly. At least as amazed as the people we tell. Why? Why do this? The short answer is that we're curious.

I'm going to border on self-help cheesiness here. We are not the sort of people who climb mountains just because they are there, who would take any opportunity to go somewhere, *anywhere*, just because it was new. We are not novelty seekers, not really. There is novelty in what we do and it's definitely nice to have. Dissatisfaction avoidance is closer to the truth. I've seen many people who continue to do the things they do, with full knowledge that it makes them unhappy, simply because it seems easier to walk the well-worn rut. I'm as habitual as the next person and I know what causes people to stay put, to toe the line, to keep moving in the same direction, knowing that tomorrow will bring more of today's irritants.

Many lay themselves on this altar for their children. Kids always require some form of sacrifice. Often, this keeps men and women in lockstep at work, doing drudgery they don't care about for the people they love. I am in awe of those who can do this, because I never could. Macole has been resilient and adaptable enough that having a constant home, a parent in a stable job, and a solidly predictable routine for the future just hasn't been necessary. I'm not saying she wouldn't have liked that. If I could repeat the past few years, I probably would have tried to build more of that into her life. We all know a teenager has more important things to worry about. I am saying that without the iron strength of her mother, she probably would be a different young woman and I'd wager that strength, both directly from Sabrina and from within her, is what has made her as well-adjusted as she's turned out to be.

I used to work with a man named John. He was, appropriately enough for this part of the story, a Mormon. He was also a railroader. Mormons tend to love larger families and place an almost supernatural importance on family time. It's

likely the importance is *literally* supernatural. For him to even work for a railroad requires a huge sacrifice in personal time. The on-call hours, time spent in hotels waiting for trains, and constant fatigue from it all will put you in a vise and crush you until blood comes out of your eyes. Maybe it's not as bad as all that, since it pays well and the benefits tend to be better than what most Americans end up with. But it's hard. It is, as they're fond of declaring in interview sessions, a lifestyle. Railroad Retirement, the pension plan railroad employees have in lieu of Social Security, offers the spouse of a retired railroader *half* of what the retiree would get, each month, just for putting up with a marriage to a person who has a polygamous relationship with a job.

John and I would talk during our office hours. We both were instructors at a railroad school, both of us not quite in our element teaching students about work we'd just rather be doing ourselves. Family came up quite a bit.

How many kids do you have?

Five.

Your house must be crazy!

It is. What are you doing this weekend?

Pretty much nothing. We'll go out and get some Indian food on Friday, but we'll probably end up staying in the house most of the time. The kid will be out with friends.

That sounds amazing.

The amount of time John had to devote to his large family was driving him to exhaustion. This was a discussion we had frequently. I would tell him about coming home to an empty house, making tomorrow's lunch for work, and then settling down to watch internet videos, read a book, or do piddly things around the house. He would listen, wrapping his mind around such a fantasy life that he probably wouldn't know for at least another 10 to 15 years, if even then. Our paths converged on rails, but otherwise couldn't have been more different.

John was in love with his kids, though, don't mistake me. He was just *tired*. I've seen folks working six 12-hour days, every week, never taking time off for months, simply to keep the family going. It's not only to keep a family fed and housed. Sometimes it's addictions. I've worked with gamblers and people who just love to get married, only to see them shackled to

alimony. Whatever the cause, the work has long since lost any kind of significance beyond the paycheck, the days just an endless stream of sunrises and sunsets without end. There's a Lamb of God song entitled "What I've Become" that always runs in my head at the sight, even the thought of these people:

*Blank stares from broken men
So withered from the poisons they can't remember when
There were once honest reasons.
It's all a lie that died 100,000 miles ago.
Pretending I'm still here.*

Then:

*Take your place in the line to be ground by the gears of
the masterpiece.*

This is my anthem to the American worker, to the modern civilized worker anywhere. Automation, labor-saving technology and all the rest of it hasn't spared us the crippling work, all of it hard, that is supposed to come with great rewards, not mere subsistence. The myth is that hard work leads to success. The reality is that hard work will only consistently lead to fatigue. You can work ten hour days as a janitor and in ten years you'll probably still be a janitor. If you enjoy being tired after your day because you enjoy what you do, then count your blessings and sleep well. Your club is very exclusive. Although in all fairness, exclusivity implies widespread desire to be included.

If you're tired for no good reason, life stripped of meaning by the procession of days spent acting on the ridiculous needs of someone or something else, ask yourself *Why?* Then you just might find yourself packing your belongings once in awhile in search of something else, because you just can't shake the feeling that you can do better. Even in failure there is nobility in the attempt.

8. Next stop: Boise, Idaho. It's about 350 miles and five hours of driving. Granted, it's all time in an uncomfortable, slow moving van, but still. We'd kept the pace leisurely to avoid getting too pissy with each other, and to allow time for the weather to have its fickle way with us.

We slipped north through Ogden and joined with Interstate 84, our blacktop tour guide for the rest of the journey to Portland. The metropolis fell away. It's open country for a large portion of the way to Boise, and this was the first time any of us had seen this part of the world.

This was the quiet middle day of our venture, the day we became aware that the road is *long*. Lively conversation more frequently succumbed to window-gazing and quiet introspection. The truck didn't have anything but AM/FM radio, so we occasionally tried to pick up something other than country or Christian, finding National Public Radio once in awhile and pop stations that were easy to make fun of and sing along to. Macole mostly just kept the earbuds in place while Sabrina and I attempted to be loud enough to be heard over them.

We crossed into Idaho. I think Macole snapped a picture of the welcome sign next to the highway as Sabrina rolled us past. Each of us ticked off the Gem State from our lists. We were at least as far north as most of Wyoming, although I get the feeling that the weather is a bit more forgiving. I will repeat it to anyone who asks: Idaho is a beautiful place.

The vast agricultural lands within view were predominantly fallow, tilled earth visible everywhere, the occasional piece of equipment towing something, plowing something, fertilizing something. The farmers might've been preparing for sowing, might also have done it awhile ago. I picture them looking up at the sky, kneeling down and feeling the soil, waiting impatiently for the right time to get to work. I suspect that even in an era that provides us with technological tools to assess the weather, many farm owners rely on their senses, having been outside enough to develop a feel for when to plant, when to water, when to prepare for frost. It's likely that retailers of *The Old Farmer's Almanac* sell more copies along our route than in many places. There might be less romance in it than that, even while I maintain my fantasy. We would be back to see the place poised for harvest, a substantially different experience. Subtle, really, but different. Subtle can be breathtaking with nothing better to do than look through the windows.

It wasn't howling with snow and wind, displaying instead a gray, drippy tableau. Occasionally it cleared enough to see the Sawtooth Range to the north, appropriately jagged and imposing. My sense of Idaho became a feeling of peace and

serenity. I can't explain why that is, exactly, or why I feel compelled to tell about it after simply driving through the place several times and staying in a hotel there once or twice. Nonetheless, I always recall a quaint, comfortable part of the world, blessed with amazing mountains, tolerable weather, and expansive agricultural fields. It's as reliable as, and about as different as can be from, the feelings I automatically associate with, say, Georgia.

We dutifully exited at the appointed place to make our way off the trail toward our rest. Boise was planned for two reasons. First, it was in just the right spot to break up the journey. Second, the Boise Co-Op was there. The Co-Op had a huge selection of groceries for granola people, with a hot bar serving all sorts of local and organically-produced fare. We stocked up on provisions for the rest of the journey and relished the sensation of being somewhere other than the cab of the truck. Rather than partake of the hot bar, we had enough time and energy to locate a nearby Indian buffet.

The next morning, we stowed our hotel bags and motored back to the Co-Op for some hot breakfast. It really is amazing what hot food can do for morale. Even the mediocre buffet of the previous night was elevating. We're not done in by three days on the road, mind you, but the distinct feeling of satisfaction that comes with a good, hot meal is very pronounced when it follows a few days of eating something that was selected for transportability or because it won't leave you with a lap full of crumbs.

Fueled and ready, we found 84 and trundled our way toward Oregon. We snapped a picture of the "Welcome to Oregon" sign that's just off the west side of the Snake River bridge, exiting at the rest stop nearby to take pictures of ourselves in the rain. We moved into the Blue Mountains, our truck struggling to make its way up the hills and around the sharp bends in the road. The Union Pacific had kept us company on and off in the Snake River valley and again in the Blues, twisting in synchronization with our roadway, veering away at times, climbing the hills and clawing at the sides of the cliffs around us. Trains occasionally appeared, fighting the pull of gravity and announcing the struggle with the roar of diesel locomotives in full throat.

Then, the day's destination: La Grande, OR. We'd only come 170 miles in about three hours, taking the opportunity to

loaf a little bit, to stretch our legs. La Grande is a quiet stop along the highway if there can be such a thing amidst the whooshing of tires, nestled in a picturesque setting among the mountains. We couldn't see much for rain and fog, but the hills are there.

Truth be told, there's not much to say about staying in La Grande. At this point, we were close enough to the Columbia River Gorge and Portland that I could think of little else. The only reason we stopped in La Grande instead of driving straight to Portland was the idea of spending eight hours in the truck only to find ourselves unloading and unpacking at the end of it. Instead, we found a convenient little place to bunk up, making our last day much less hateful.

WP

Waking on the final moving day, we fueled up the truck, a lament on the fuel efficiency of these things if not a totally practical measure. We'd left La Grande early, eager to cross the finish line. The Blue Mountains around us, we approached Cabbage Hill for the first time.

I was aware, having come up one side of Oregon's Blue Mountains, that we would need to come back down. We're mountain drivers anyway, so it's not like there's very much on the interstate highway system that is beyond us,¹⁰ and the system is designed to keep grades as light as possible and speeds as high as possible. This is in service to the idea that rapid, safe interstate transportation should be something we can all enjoy. Cabbage Hill still manages to be exceptional on a route where exceptionalism has been deliberately avoided.

Deadman's Pass is traversed by Cabbage Hill. Please don your cowboy hat now. Every state probably has a Deadman's something. Colorado has at least one Deadman's Curve. Apparently the Pass in question got the name when a teamster was killed by renegades in the area. The name stuck when further frontier violence made people afraid to take up the reins for a trip through the Blues. The curve I'm thinking of in Colorado is on I-70 eastbound near Morrison, and owes its name to people driving too fast and sliding over the edge of a pretty sizable drop. Today there's a giant concrete barrier in place to prevent recurrence. From the black streaks and deep gouges on

10 We're kind of a big deal.

its surface, the light sprinkling of disintegrated car pieces distributed like so much talus at the base of its near-vertical slope, I conclude that the barrier is probably a good thing. We could probably rename it Catcher's Mitt. Last Chance. Inevitability?

The name Cabbage Hill, in local lore, seems to come from a woman who had a cabbage farm at the top. A third name for the Hill is Emigrant Hill, named for the route of the Oregon Trail, which is fairly close to the asphalt of modern day I-84. Whatever you call it, that-which-has-three-names is worthy of note.

From above, the highway down Cabbage Hill looks as if the chief interstate draftsman for the route got slapped on the wrist while drawing the plans. In 6 or 7 miles, the highway drops 2,000 feet of elevation at about a 6% grade. That's 6 feet of vertical change for every 100 feet of horizontal change, steep enough that to build a railway up such a slope would require cogs between the rails in the Swiss fashion. There are hairpin turns and wild weather changes just for spice.

Approaching the hill for the first time, the usual warning signs started appearing in front of us on the highway. Things like, "CHECK YOUR BRAKES" and "TRUCKERS USE LOW GEAR" and "NO, REALLY. IF YOU CAN'T STOP, YOU'RE PROBABLY DEAD". It was spring in the Blue Mountains and while there was snow around, the road was clear. But when we finally reached the summit of the Hill of Cabbage and started descending, we realized that we were essentially driving off a cliff. The road winds and twists in knots because it is clinging to what little real estate is available to use for a road here. The highway splits east and westbound lanes for the same reason, and produces the aerial spaghetti on the map. For our trouble, we were rewarded with an amazing view down into the Columbia River valley and Pendleton, OR. We could see far enough to the west to make out what would be the final obstacle of this route, the Cascade Mountains. Sabrina dutifully downshifted and we drifted lazily westward. Cabbage Hill: beautiful, steep, but not very long.

Gravity catapulted us out of the mountains and into the valley, flying through Pendleton at highway speed. I became able to marry a place to the words printed on many a piece of woolen clothing, Pendleton being the home of a well-known textile factory. The signs along the road indicated a factory outlet store

and that the shearings of many a sheep still converged there to be turned into insulation for people.

Wind turbines decorated the distance. The enormous Union Pacific railyard in Hermiston, stage right. Vast tree plantations are on our left. I'd never seen tree farms that weren't set up for Christmas until then. Rank upon rank of trees, all the same type, in perfect lines. Each enormous plot of trees is the same age, height, girth, and probably has the same amount of time to live. A corn field, writ large. I've read somewhere that it's surprisingly easy to get lost while walking around in one of these tree farms and they're littered with directional markers to prevent the inevitable. Getting lost in one seems like it would leave a person feeling a bit short changed, like becoming hopelessly lost in the cheesy, child-friendly mirror maze at a carnival. Not that I speak from experience.

Then a peculiar opening in the scenery ahead and I realize we've struck water.

“Is that a *river*?”

“Yeah, that's the Columbia!”

The highway hooks left at Boardman and we followed the current into the valley. The Snake River was big enough, but this was *humbling*. It's a good thing my wife was driving, because my eyes were not on the road. Between the river itself, the boats upon it, the rails on either side of it, and the gorge it has carved out of the rocks, there is never a dull moment. You'll forgive me if I repeat myself when describing this place. It's not bad editing; it's *emphasis*. The thrill of the first time carries over into subsequent passages of the area and we go through here many times. It may not be the best drive in the world, but it's probably my favorite of any in the United States, for all of the reasons stated and re-stated here. We observed what we could through the low clouds and misty rain.

During one of our stops for fuel, I discovered a leak somewhere in the cargo box. I expected this. After getting the truck home when we first pulled it out of the rental place, a quick glance around the back revealed that there were copious amounts of silicone sealant gobbled in corners, clearly an attempt at some sort of waterproofing. I assumed that the water would probably still be making its way inside. And so it was, just enough to be visible on the roof and floor. When we packed, boxes were

mostly kept off the bottom layer and our ever-so-handy plastic tubs were assigned to the low parts of the stack. There were a few items that were getting a bit wet, but nothing damaged as far as I could see. Gas tank filled, I locked up the back door and folded into the cab.

I won't mince words: I was sick of being in the van. There was plenty to love about the world outside my windows, but I wanted to be there and unloaded already. I was *very* ready to sleep in my own bed. The irritation was of course shared among us.

Onward we drove, through Arlington, Rufus, and Biggs Junction. The Dalles and its creosote treatment facility filled our eyes and nostrils. Rowena. Hoosier. Hood River and its group of windsurfers, who never really seem to care what the weather is as long as there is moving air on the water. The Cascades came out of the mist, the trees announcing our entry to a whole new ecosystem. None of us had ever been in a land that is this conducive to producing greenery. The Colorado cottonwoods are big, but these trees were deific. Also something unseen in Colorado forests: an understory. A thick carpet of ferns, moss, and shrubs covered every inch of ground under the towering pines.

In 1998, I walked through my first Colorado forest. The military had just stationed me at Ft. Carson, just outside of Colorado Springs on the Front Range of the Rockies. I remember moving among the trees and being struck by the scent of pine. Pennsylvanian forests had much more deciduous and hardwood species, lending a very different fragrance. Here, there were lovely red-barked ponderosa pines and twisted junipers among pinyon pines and scrub oaks. In between everything was clear, rocky soil covered in a layer of evergreen needles and infrequent, low vegetation. It looked like a park compared to the forests of my youth, where there was never bare, open ground of this sort unless one was in a maintained public space. Back east, it was deep, soft layers of fallen leaves over top of the dark soil. The smell of compost and leaf mulch. These pine forests are younger, with less soil and very few deciduous trees to lay down a blanket of organic matter. It was quite an interesting adjustment to make.

Looking at the forest scenes slipping by the window in the rain, I was reminded of Appalachian woodlands, but I didn't remember trees of this size. A nagging idea formed in my brain that I'd need to go walking around out there, to see them first

hand, up close.

We passed the John Day dam, one of many navigational and hydroelectric facilities in the Columbia watershed. Dams freak me out a little bit. I first really noticed this as an adolescent while visiting the Francis E. Walter dam, a large piece of engineering placed in the course of my native Lehigh River. Like many others of its kind, a road crosses the top which allows visitors to look at both the lovely reservoir created and the actual elevation of the course of the river. Standing on top of such a structure and seeing the unimaginable quantity of water impounded behind it gives me goosebumps. I may have watched too much of The Weather Channel as a kid and seen too many videos of the power of water in floods. This isn't a paralyzing, leg-weakening breakdown, mind you, but I'd really prefer not to linger on such structures. This despite the track record that dams have of *not* spontaneously failing. Bridges don't do this to me even when they shake with passing trucks, and I've fallen off of a bridge or two in my life. Go figure.

There were waterfalls everywhere. We were toward the end of the rainy season, so if it had been a typical year the reservoirs were all filled to the brim, the lakes spilling over their edges. A larger waterfall appeared on the south side of the highway, apparently a tourist trap and no wonder: it was almost directly off the road. This was Multnomah Falls, a popular local tourist destination. It is hundreds of feet high, and while not nearly as grand as Niagara, it is a site of distinctive beauty that none of us were expecting to see next to the interstate. For me, it signals the outskirts of Portland. We would never get any closer than the lanes of I-84, however. The place is so accessible, so well-known that there is *always* a crowd.

WP

After the outskirts, we arrived upskirt in Portland. A normal white-on-green road sign marks the city boundary. Long forgotten by local residents, or perhaps used by crotchety old men trying to figure out criticisms to hurl at city council meetings, the sign let us know we'd made it in one piece and with most of our sanity intact.

Finding the path to the new apartment proved interesting. In addition to all of the other firsts on this trip, this was our first taste of Portland traffic. Coming from Denver,

where the traffic is its own brand of hell, we were somewhat tempered but two things stood out. First, there were a bunch of people out on the road in this town. It was barely one or two o'clock and we weren't moving very fast, with the sight of brake lights for miles in front of us. Second, our slow truck found vehicles on both bumpers as people crawled up our ass and cut us off with regularity.

Fortunately, our exit arrived and we got out of the scrum, concluding what would be our last brush with the 84 for quite some time. I became thankful we had no car with us. Any experience of traffic after we returned the moving van would be from the windows of buses and trains.

In not too much time, we arrived at our new place on SE 28th Place. It was considered to be “inner” southeast, with “outer” usually reserved for everything east of 82nd. The Willamette River, the zeroth street, is where east becomes west, 28 blocks from us. The landlord left the keys in the unit, doors unlocked. I was suddenly nervous. We'd never seen the place we paid for, having scouted and made our decision online. None of us had stepped inside, looked out the windows, or smelled the inside air of our new apartment. This is a gamble that can go horribly wrong. My mind, of course, jumped to horrible visions of moldy bathroom walls and musty bedrooms. I braced for the acrid smell of a smoker's apartment or a whiff of feces. If Sabrina was nervous, it didn't show.

We walked up the stairs and twisted the knob. One of the joys of having a mind that expects the awful is that I'm seldom let down by what is *actually* on the other side of the door. We stepped into a decent-sized place that smelled of forest, more like the city itself than a once-flooded basement. It was chilly inside and we began to work out how to put some warmth in our place.

We spent a hilarious few minutes deciphering how to use what must be euphemistically called “zonal heat”. The theory is that it only makes sense to heat the rooms which are occupied, an idea I completely agree with. In practice this usually amounts to wall-mounted boxes in different areas around the house, each with its own knob for controlling the level of heat that comes out of it. I'm still on board with the theory at this point.

Each heater is a box with electric heating grids and a fan blowing that heat into the room. They're large hair dryers and they devour enormous quantities of power. I won't mince words:

this is the dumbest way to heat a home I've ever seen. The heaters are loud, the air doesn't move much further than a five- or six-foot cone directly in front of them before heading for the ceiling, and the warm, lovely, lasting radiant heat that comes from a fireplace or a hot water radiator system is non-existent. In order to warm a room, you need to fill it with hot air as if you were taking it on a balloon trip. The ceiling heats first and the warmth slowly descends to where you are, heating your head first.

Fortunately, it doesn't get all that cold in these parts, but it gets chilly enough that a person wants heat and zonal systems end up being quite expensive in the production of it. I suppose people who live in these parts are just better adapted to chilly weather.

“Warmed”, the three of us made short work of the boxes and bins, rapidly filling every available space with the contents of the van. All went in fairly easily, making the tight turn at the top of the stairs into our door.

The truck went back to the rental place and we hopped a bus back home. Walking to our new digs, exhaustion set in. Our work wasn't quite done for the day, with a move-in inspection to perform and some spot cleaning to do. It may not have smelled like feces, but there was a unique feature in the apartment that *had* some feces in it. If I've ever seen this anywhere else I never took note of it, but there was a nook under the vanity in the bathroom, evidently for a litter box. It wasn't quite clean. Expletives emitted, it was scrubbed up and forgotten in the ensuing wave of unpacking. Our first apartment together as a three-piece, our first time in a new city. Lots to see, lots to explore. Tomorrow, grocery shopping.

9. Somewhere between reading Michael Pollan and actually hugging trees we developed some odd habits. Many of these quirks center around food and the buying, growing, or eating of it. As part of our car-free lifestyle, we needed to find a place in Portland that was close to a grocery store. When I say close, I mean that we needed to be able to walk there, regularly, and return with groceries. This can be a challenge in normal circumstances, but after reading this list the actual scope of the (completely self-imposed) challenge before us will become clearer:

1. Organic or better food whenever possible. Books have been written (many of them authored by Pollan) describing the organic food issue. We don't believe that organic saves the planet, but it's also not simply the paranoia of people who peddle crystals.
2. Locally-produced whenever possible. We don't have a mileage restriction, but we are willing to pay a little more for something that came from our country when the alternative was shipped here on a bunker-fuel-burning container ship.
3. We'll grow it if we can. As space-limited apartment dwellers, this is difficult. For reasons both practical and psychological, the food you've grown for yourself will often taste the best. It's amazing what a tomato actually tastes like when it isn't grown merely to be an attractive shelf display or withstand travel.
4. Packaging is the enemy. Grab a scoop, fill your reusable bag, label it for the cashier, and away you go. If you really apply yourself to reducing packaging, the difference at the garbage end is noticeable. Once the practice becomes routine, plastic grocery bags make you wince.
5. Avoidance of added sugars and other "evil" ingredients. We have no diabetics in the family, but we do have people who hate tooth decay. Honey, maple syrup, molasses, agave, and the like are preferable, even though they might only be marginally better than plain old refined white sugar when it comes down to it. We are the people who spend ridiculous amounts of time reading ingredient labels at the grocer, divesting ourselves of the products that have things like monosodium glutamate or carageenan in them.

These requirements rule out trips to the typical American grocer. We try to keep abreast of changes in understanding with respect to the body's ability to process and digest things, adjusting how we eat accordingly. We stop short of fad dieting, but we integrate what makes sense into our eating habits and keep close watch on the ways in which our feasting affects us. That said, I shamelessly eat bananas, despite there being very few places to grow them within 2,000 miles of Oregon. Selective hypocrisy, if you will. I too have a bunker fuel debt.

Our place in southeast Portland was chosen for a few reasons, but one of them was its proximity to People's Co-Op. A small store aimed squarely at flower children, there is nonetheless an amazing variety of products that meet or exceed all of our demanding specifications. Part of the store is constructed of a clay/straw/sand mixture called cob. There's a living roof and quite an impressive rainwater garden outside. There's a community room upstairs where they hold yoga classes and at one point we even got bloodwork and a routine health checkup done there. The store was a short, mile-long walk from the apartment. We purchased a small folding cart for the groceries, of the type used by elderly folks coming back home from their errands.

WP

With a climate that tends toward the oceanic, our frequent walks provided ample opportunity to appreciate the vast differences between western Oregon and the Front Range of the Rockies. I remember being struck by the moss and lichen, *everywhere*. Cracks in the sidewalk quickly become painted green. Looking up into the trees revealed that they, too, had been colonized by even smaller plants: trees growing their own gardens. Even in winter, the place was green. The shedding of leaves only enhanced the view of all the moss. The understory, full of ferns and shrubs, remained green too. It's amazing what the lack of regular hard frosts will do.

The act of simply identifying the variety of trees in an area became impossible. In Colorado, there are probably less than ten species of tree that are commonly found outside of gardens and parks, and even there the number probably only rises to twenty. It wasn't unreasonable to pass twenty or thirty while pushing our granny cart full of hippie food back to our Portland place. I remember passing one particular cedar tree, the likes of which I have never seen. At least 120 feet tall, the specimen stood casually in someone's front yard, challenging you to wrap your arms around it. To me, cedar is a smallish windbreak tree planted by people who want backyard privacy. In Portland, they grow into imposing evergreen specimens of noble stature. I suppose all those fencing pickets and shingles need to come from somewhere.

The staggering variety of plant life was an amazing and

somehow unexpected surprise. I managed to identify a few, but it took me awhile to find books and online resources that helped me recognize the silky madrone, the reserved hellebore, stinky ginkgo, the other-worldly monkey puzzle tree, and yes, giant sequoia. Truly surprising were the palm trees, a little disorienting on a drippy 50-degree day in March, but there you have it. I discovered a deep love for Japanese maples and all of their wondrous forms, the deep summer shade of bigleaf maples, and fig trees offering fruit to me as I passed on the sidewalk. On one memorable trip to the Hoyt Arboretum, I remember walking down a winding hill path and reading a plaque:

California Bay Laurel
Umbellularia californica

Breaking off a leaf, I smashed some of it in my hand and smelled it. Until then, I had never really realized that bay leaves come from, you know, trees. The same spice that sells for six dollars per (small)bag can be plucked freely from the limbs of something that grows in a public park.¹¹ Some of these are probably species that I grew up with in eastern Pennsylvania, and in fact would be positively identified on later trips there. I just never noticed them or cared to pay much attention. As a granola-eating environment lover, this was singing my song.

It was the middle of March and there were flowers blooming everywhere. Over time, I would begin to realize that there are maybe two months out of the year when there is not some shrub, tree, or flower in bloom, each taking their turn to steal your eye, and sometimes there are so many flowers among the foliage that it's almost gaudy. In no particular order: dogwoods, magnolias, azaleas, rhododendrons, chrysanthemums, catalpas, and the *roses*. I should have seen this coming from the City of Roses, but from early spring on into winter there were roses blooming. Great gardens of them, lovely specimens decorating highway medians and forgotten margins, they all stood ready to receive honeybee and nose alike.

I had grown so accustomed to October in Colorado, when an early frost kills everything colorful and it's nothing but brown and gray until March, when the bulbs dare to come out

11 I didn't know that this wasn't *the* bay laurel used as a spice, but the leaves would probably work anyway. Sweet bay, or *Laurus nobilis*, is the real deal, and is also found in the Hoyt Arboretum.

and risk being avalanched to death. The bright Colorado sunshine counts for something, but the color and vibrancy of life that depends on there being plenty of gray, wet days is just as bewitching. I guess there are people who like their winters sunny and crispy, and those who enjoy lush, colorful moisture. I confess that I cannot choose.

In the realm of the everyday exotic, we were soothed to sleep by the sounds of the rain. Those of us who live in places where the raindrops can play us to sleep are lucky indeed. It's a great improvement, in my mind, over the howling rasp of a chill winter wind, the ethereal substitute for rain that I'd lived with for so many years. The pattering of water on leaves works on me as reliably as crickets. The regularity of deep, soaking, gentle rain is quite a switch from drought-addled Colorado, where much of the annual moisture is snow and quick outbursts from summer storms. Overnight showers are seldom available to sing lullabies to weary people.

WP

In Denver, we had figured out where our favorite Indian restaurants were. We struck out many times in our search for a replacement, arriving to be served bizarre fusions of American and Indian cuisine, unsweetened(!) chai, or horrifically fishy saag.

We hit a home run when we found a woman who called herself the Chai Chuski, tending a small food cart near Pioneer Courthouse downtown. Her rig was positioned near the Transit Mall, where many of Portland's buses and trains converged in a riot of public transportation options. We actually found her by smell. Walking to catch a bus one day, Sabrina and I turned to each other with the, "Do you smell that?" look on our faces. There she was, brewing a cup for a gentleman who had found refuge from the rain under her cart's umbrella.

Walking over, we watched her stirring a well-used steel pot on a small burner, the smell of spices making us very eager to get our mouths wet with tea. It wasn't a quick process; Starbucks this was not. The man in front of us had a cup of steaming hot love in his hands and we wanted a piece of that action. Speaking with the lady revealed that she could make just about any kind of chai we desired. This is Portland, after all, so if you want a vegan chai made with soy or almond milk, she could

deliver. Creamy whole milk chai was also an option. Caffeine free rooibos chai? Check. The range of spices she had was unique and tailored to fit. Selecting our brew, she began by boiling some water and adding loose leaf tea to begin steeping. The spices were selected and added to the darkening water. Milk flowed into the swirling water, highlighting the spices and tea leaves and completing the bouquet. A variety of sweeteners was available for the pot, usually a bit of honey for us.

As she stirred, we talked. She had been to India and seen how chai was made there. Her methods and spices were derived from what she saw and tasted while in-country. It probably took five or ten minutes for her to produce a pair of cups of absolutely amazing liquid. From that day, all three of us would visit her several times per week, often with no other purpose apart from the tea. It would be quite a while before we found a cup to rival hers and I don't think we've found one yet that's better.

10. I can't talk about our trips to Portland without bringing up jobs and it's hard to talk about jobs without mentioning how idealistic we'd become. Macole was settling in to her new middle school, making new friends and adapting to her new life in the Northwest. We, on the other hand, were enjoying not working, maybe a little too much. Sabrina's unemployment compensation still had some time left on it and along with the money we'd saved we were able to live comfortably with no rush to find work. Without the threat of looming debts or bills left unpaid, we were able to build up quite a list of demands that we felt our work should meet.

We had both done plenty of corporate work and were both equally sick of the inversely proportional relationship between company size and employee importance that seems to accompany these jobs. The definition of "big corporation" was quite flexible but we were looking for work with a responsible purpose: public service sector jobs, work that promotes environmental health or stands against the rapacious appetites of industry, non-profit positions that generally help people live their lives well.

Once Goldi-jobs has found employment, the commute must be manageable. I know that many folks accept 45 minutes of ulcerating traffic without much thought, but I'm not among them. I'd do 45 on my bike. If I could walk to work, great. The bus was my third choice, since I'd still be sitting in traffic even if

it's not as stressful. Of all the requirements on this list, this one is always least likely to see compromise, and not simply because we no longer owned a car. My wife has been very patient with me on this. On one memorable occasion, she was describing our(my) requirements, discussing approximately how far we(I) needed to be from work in order to comfortably get to work by bike and have a little fun(FUN!) on my commute.¹² Her sister: “He's so low-maintenance that he's *high* maintenance.”

Apart from my pedal-powered rigidity, any requirements can be thrown out for interesting jobs that spark interest and curiosity. Knowing what we want and having the ideal in mind just makes it easier for us to zero in on what's important.

It was with interest and curiosity that I learned about a small factory very close to our apartment called Bullseye Glass Company. The art glass they produce has been used to create beautiful things that may not be necessary, but hot damn are they neat: glass beads, slump-molded plates and bowls, unimaginable forms in the style of Dale Chihuly,¹³ and of course “smoking accessories” for your “marijuana”. The mission of promoting and changing the way people produce art is a cause I can get behind. Walking by the factory, a large roll-up door was open right next to the sidewalk and I could see people ladling out molten glass from glowing furnaces. The globs were taken to a table where they were put through something resembling a laundry wringer and a team of people worked to roll out and flatten each orange-hot glob into a sheet. The glowing sheet was taken to a long conveyor-like machine to cool. It sometimes surprises me how taking most any job and adding fire will instantly make it more attractive.

I applied for some positions and waited for a response. When it came, the process was fairly standard except for two things. First, there was the factory tour during which I was able to see all those furnaces and molten glass up close. This would have been worth the price of admission all by itself. Second, I took a test that featured a box of art glass samples. I was tasked with describing their colors in my own words. I wrote things like

12 It's about five miles. Further than this and I need to start going further into bike-expedition mode. I have flexed on this over the years, and the number has ranged from about two miles to fourteen. Each has their advantages.

13 I don't believe Chihuly even uses Bullseye's glass, preferring another brand. I'm sure the same works could be created with the Bullseye stuff, though the artist is free to disagree with me.

tangerine iridescent and *translucent red smoke* for the first time in my life. I am fairly good with colors but I have no idea how well I did on that part, despite it being some of the most fun I've ever had in an interview. I turned in my descriptions, thanked the lady for the interview, and walked the mile home feeling really good about my chances, giddy that I was able to see inside the factory.

I received a letter in the mail not long after. To my surprise, it was from Bullseye. To my dismay, it was a rejection. Even in 2011 it was so rare to get an actual letter as part of the hiring process that I think it softened the blow a little bit. It also contained another offer for an interview. This pattern would continue for a total of *four* interviews, all resulting in rejections, not all of them with letters afterward. This was absolutely heartbreaking for me because the job seemed so perfect at the time. It was also very puzzling. I received feedback that the hiring supervisor had issues with my job history, citing my lack of staying power with any one job beyond about three years, the first whispers that I had ballsed up my employability with indecision. They were looking for people who would stick around. I understand this completely. It's an absolute pain to train people, get them up to speed, and then watch them leave. However, I had been following the job postings at Bullseye for quite some time and it seemed the position I was applying for came up at least every three months or so, leading to questions about their hiring practices. This pattern has continued into the ensuing years since my interviews, with astonishing regularity. I confess that I still look at their job postings once in awhile, if only to further frustrate myself.

With that, here's another of my gripes with modern employment practices. There is a stubborn reliance upon past performance history to determine present suitability. I have been disqualified for jobs prior to the interview for my job history and to put it in application-speak, I've never "been fired or asked to resign or leave", ever. I've even been re-hired a few times, and never as the result of litigation.

Think of it this way: I get married. To the wrong person. For a while we do fine, then we muddle through, then we fall apart. My next love interest is likely to be curious about this sort of thing, but personally I don't mind how you were with other people. I care about how you are with *me*. So employers as lovers, then. Sure, you should check my job history and get a

sense for what I've done and what I know. How could you not? When making an assumption about how I will perform for your company though, it's time to get out the time-tested person-evaluation skill and just talk to me for awhile. Try to read between the lines. How many people ever get re-hired? Am I nice to talk to, interested in the work? What do my references say about me? This is bitterness talking and I should cut it short, but it's difficult to accept four rejections from a company that somehow made it through my absurd requirements, and all that for jobs I was, objectively, well-qualified to do.

Sabrina was on her own journey to find work with a very similar list of needs and wants. To keep her unemployment benefits coming, she was required to apply for a number of jobs each week, a number she was regularly exceeding. This is a well-educated, capable woman with good experience. She was rarely getting asked to interviews.

We had known about Portland's job market before coming, but in our self-convincing denial we had reassured ourselves that the higher-than-average unemployment rate, not to mention the large numbers of well-schooled people who were likely to be competing with us wouldn't be much of an obstacle. Our rationale for this was actually based on experience. Denver had both been through the same recession and also *not* been through it. The impacts were much less severe in the Mile High City relative to many places. From the perspective of a Denver city-dweller, the news about the devastating impact of the economic downturn, the layoffs, the fortunes lost, the hordes of roving jobless...these things sounded like dramatizations. Even so, the hyperbole was definitely driven by a reality to which Portland was introducing us.

I also won't pretend that being idealistic twats was helping us much. Sabrina has confessed to walking into interviews with maybe a little too much attitude. For my part, many job postings expired with no action from me, simply because of some hangup I had with a product they produced or the hours I'd be required to work. We were getting in our own way. Don't get me wrong, I still hate plastic bags, still can't work for an oil company. Sabrina will never again work in corporate sales. The difference is that we've learned to lower the flame. Having so much passion can be an asset, but in many cases people just think *What an ass* as they bin your application.

Not working full-time allowed the days to be filled in

other ways. I volunteered at a feminist bookstore called In Other Words, helping them to catalog a collection of books for a new lending library. The store actually featured as a place called Women and Women First in *Portlandia*.

This was also a time spent writing and walking. More often than not I ended up strolling near railroad tracks. There's something special about the industrial, less-peopled places in a city. They end up forming a sort of urban wilderness that can be more peaceful than the well traveled hiking paths in local parks among the breathtaking stands of northwestern forest. On these walks I decided that my first book would be something philosophical. I love philosophy and I tried to figure out if I could claim to have produced a work of philosophy, and thus become a philosopher, without, say, teaching at a university or orating to groups of enthralled young people in a public park. I came to the conclusion that the only real qualification one must have to claim the title is to actually *do the work*. After all, if there's any discipline with one foot (and occasionally both feet) in the world where anything that can be conceived can also be real, this is it. If I wanted to make myself into a philosopher, even a crappy one, I didn't think anyone would begrudge me the honor. I may never get to speak at Oxford, but I suppose that's just the price I'll pay.

Intention set, I resolved to write something significant, if only to me. We were sitting in a coffee shop on southeast Division Street enjoying some of the best bean I've ever tasted, staring at an empty laptop screen, the proverbial blank page. It didn't take too long to decide what to start with, having mapped out a rough outline in my head on my walks. These coffee shop sessions went on a few days per week. I was the stereotypical dude with glasses and a beard, working on some literary pursuit in public. It was a very fun way to spend time. I would at least earn the mantle of *hipster* from passers-by even if they wouldn't be caught dead calling me a philosopher.

This was the pattern that would see us through much of our first stint in Portland. We walked and bussed ourselves around the city, seeing what there was to see, drinking great coffee and chai tea, all while trying to find suitable work to meet our otherworldly list of requirements. I would say it was a waste of time, but that would overlook everything that was wonderful about it.

WP

An army might march on its stomach, but urban tree huggers need a good public transit system. TriMet, the regional entity responsible for the buses and trains, deserves commendation in this regard. For their money, the taxpayers of Multnomah County got a truly useful tool. The buses were well-maintained, as on time as could be expected with the awful traffic of the area, and they took us to useful places. It was a step up from what we were used to in Denver. The buses had digitized voices to announce stops, unlike the muttered, unintelligible utterances of Denver drivers through a scratchy microphone.¹⁴ There were even strips of red overhead lighting near the front of the buses, probably in place for the sake of the drivers' night vision, but we liked the disco mood they applied to the passenger cabin. To cap it off, the TriMet vehicles burned biodiesel, reducing the acidity at the exhaust end. The light rail system in Portland has been around since the 1980's and has the feel of a well-worn subway system. This is good, since Portland has no subway of its own¹⁵ and it's nice to see a rail option: no traffic to speak of on the high iron.

Even the passenger demographic in Portland was better. Back when we were regularly riding the buses in Denver, many of the people who rode the bus were not doing it by choice. Each bus had a varying number of people who very clearly lost their licenses or served time. This isn't a casual dismissive glance coupled with hastily formed judgment talking here. Closer inspection reveals prison tattoos, the smell of alcohol, and frequent, loud conversation about days spent in the clink, visits to the parole board, or fights with the other half. Also, *actual fights* with the other half. Ankle bracelets were in evidence. None of the three of us ever really had much trouble from these folks, but we have seen people dry heaving behind the seats and conflicts started on the bus (and then carried on once off the bus), and heard conversations that probably should have been more confidential. It's a less threatening version of the bus stereotype that people fear. *Awkward* is a better way to envision

14 Denver has since switched to its own automatic announcers, much to the relief of everyone who needs to know where to get off the bus.

15 How would they keep the water out of it? For that matter, how does New York?

it.

To be fair, we weren't riding the crown jewels of the Regional Transportation District (or RTD, Denver's transit entity) fleet. We lived in the West Colfax neighborhood and the number 16 bus that served Hooker Street also went, eventually, to the Jefferson County Justice Center as well as originating very near to the Denver County Jail, County Courthouse, and the probation offices. In local lore, this bus is probably third behind East Colfax's 15 and Broadway's 0 in terms of least comfortable Denver bus experiences that will cause you to switch your wallet to a front pocket and thumb the trigger of your pepper spray. Later, we would discover a more subdued experience riding the Federal Boulevard buses to go to the Indian buffet, getting cozy with our fellow riders during standing-room-only evening commutes.

Portland differed from Denver quite significantly on the subject of the commuters themselves. The category of people on the Portland buses was heavily skewed toward folks who just don't want to drive. Don't get me wrong, the hard-luck cadre was still on the buses but they were vastly outnumbered by people getting around town, going to work, enjoying the fact that they could choose to take the bus because it was reliable, convenient, and economical. Or they just liked to space out and listen to music on the way to work. The buses were, in general, more full than in Denver, but the people of Portland seemed to have integrated transit commuting into their culture, taking a page from New Yorkers, many of whom couldn't imagine life without a subway. It was a subtle difference easily noticed by anyone who took more than a couple rides per week.

WP

Finding myself in bicycle Mecca, I took the Hajj. Immediately, it was a different sensation. A cyclist barely needed a map to get around. There were strategically located destination signs and direction arrows with distances everywhere, not just at two or three spots in parks. This seems like an obvious thing considering every highway has the same feature, but I'd never seen such effective signage for bicycles. Some traffic lights featured special signals for the bikes and equipment sensitive enough that the metal in your bicycle frame would trigger a signal to change. This especially is a nice feature, since I can't

tell you how many times I've had to wait for a car to change a light for me, only to get frustrated and just treat it like a stop sign.¹⁶

In Portland, there is an odd backlash against the buses, trains, and bike lanes that knit the city together. Maybe “odd” isn't the word and it might be more accurately described as “predictable and repugnant.” There are those who believe that anything fitting into the Not Car category should be slid to the edge of the table, and then off of it into the yawning trash can below. This also applies literally to any proposal in local government that arrives for consideration at the workstations of legislators and politicians. In this more-free-than-most country, sometimes people confuse what is granted to them by right of birth and what is a privilege granted by our unique position in history. When cities get large and congestion is endemic, there are few sensible solutions that don't involve making it less convenient to drive alone in a separate vehicle. Even if the solutions aren't mandated by government and forced on a begrudging public, gridlock and hour-long commutes introduce the inconvenience quite organically.

When I feel I am being forced out of my car, forced to ride a bus, forced to walk or get out in the rain and pedal to work, forced to get on a train, *this* is what leads to anger. I am forced to change what I have been comfortable doing. I get it. It's just that the alternative posed by everyone who opposes buses, bikes, and trains is always, “Just invest in more [insert automobile infrastructure here].” The problem with this alternative is something called induced demand.

When the supply of a thing is increased, demand for that thing also generally increases. When a highway is widened, more people will soon discover that there are now fewer traffic jams and switch from whatever commuting method they were using to take advantage. Not long afterward, the highway is just as slow as it was before, owing to all the new commuters.

Clearly this couldn't continue to infinity, as there really are only so many commuters, not to mention the difficulty of

16 I know, I know, write me up for a traffic citation. But if I'm supposed to follow the rules of the road, then the infrastructure of the road needs to acknowledge that I *exist*. This isn't an excuse to ride like a goober and make up my own rules, but I'll be damned if I'm going to sit at a red light on an empty road at two in the morning to wait for a car to trigger the inductors. Or even at two in the afternoon.

trying to get from the fast lane to the exit lane on a highway of infinite width. The question then becomes: where traffic levels would actually support a 40-lane highway, would it make any sense to build one? The answer chosen by many cities is obviously “No.” Replacing neighborhoods with extra highway lanes is never popular and always expensive. The most sensible solution, uncomfortable though it may be, is to compel (coerce?) people to change how they get from place to place. Many people in my country have a serious problem with this. Our cars are culturally imbued with more importance than they deserve and the defenders of this importance are legion. Tolls are heretical. Bicycles are for lesser men and hipsters. Children.

Thus, there is backlash against cyclists. Drivers in Portland were more tolerant of my pedal-powered body than in many places, but there were also more people like me out there. This is the first and only place that I've ever encountered *bicycle* traffic. Pedaling out of our southeast Portland apartment, up through the X-shaped Ladd's Addition neighborhood and on into North Portland to volunteer at the bookstore, I was sharing the road with dozens of bikers. This wasn't a town of recreational riders; they took their bicycles with them everywhere and I was happy to be among them, if a little thrown by how many there were. I actually needed to be careful before I whipped out a hand signal for my turns, lest I clock some adjacent rider in the face. We occasionally rode in packs, our numbers providing a margin of safety from the vehicles, herd animals with wheels.

I really don't see eye to eye with people who are against the development of transit and bicycle culture. I never imagined I would be able to function in a large city without the aid of a car, but we tried it anyway. It worked. We would discover later that the smaller the town gets, the more difficult this can become. Small towns in the United States tend to spend very little money on public transportation, so the bus systems in them, if they exist, are usually awful. Traffic is light enough in such places that people just drive everywhere and don't think twice about it. For where we were and what we needed in Portland that year though, we were doing just fine. That is, until we weren't.

WP

Denials. Dead-end interviews. Ideals clashing with available options. These were our reality in the summer of 2011

and it was pushing us to frustration. We were both recalibrating to the lower standard of living, getting used to living somewhere other than the comfortable house on Hooker Street, and trying to grapple with the reality that our old corporate jobs had at least one serious benefit: they paid us what we were worth.¹⁷

Macole, on the other hand, was adjusting to her new school and making many new friends. Sabrina and I attended a fun little “continuation” ceremony, marking her passing from eighth grade to the life of a high-schooler. She loved the cool, rainy weather as much as I did and really seemed to be taking it all in stride. The young woman has the strength of her mother and thank goodness for that. We were just beginning to test it.

Sabrina is perpetually cold. If the temperature is below 90 degrees she will probably have a light jacket ready to hand. Over the years, I've tried to figure out how this can be real, thinking (as you probably are) that it's just a lack of acclimatization to colder places. “If she just spends enough time in the cold and doesn't turn up the heat in the winter, she'll eventually adapt,” according to this line of erroneous thinking. The woman is a tropical plant and no amount of hardening off is going to suit her to cooler temperatures. She can tolerate and live with them, but true comfort is only achieved in the heat of summer. The Pacific Northwest leaves her chilled.

Our job-hunting frustrations led us to search for work in other (warmer) places. Despite its relatively high latitude Portland isn't cold by any means, but by looking further south we were able to find towns where educated people were in demand. I was the trigger man for this one. I was getting the urge to do some railroading again, irrespective of the ideological hangups I have with the industry. Some southern towns began to stand out as places of great opportunity in this regard. There were a few in Florida, ruled out by Sabrina's negative memories of spending time there herself. We found some more in nearby Georgia. Savannah alone had four or five job opportunities on the rails.

So we toyed with the idea. A smaller coastal town, Savannah is about 20 miles from the Atlantic Ocean and firmly in what I would consider the hot part of the country. I've never pictured myself as a southern man. The town, though, was intriguing and seemed to have a touch of charm owing to its old colonial history. Sabrina humored me by searching for Savannah

17 Note: equating self-worth with monetary earnings is never a good idea.

jobs and managed to find a few interesting opportunities. One was as an instructor at Savannah State University. She had been using her time to earn a master's degree, qualifying her as a professor. In many parts of the country, it is damned difficult to find enough educated people willing to teach and Savannah was hungry for instructors.

WP

I can remember the walk when Sabrina told me she didn't want to stay in Portland much longer. I can still see the palm tree I was looking at as we made our way to the Holgate bus. It wasn't a complete surprise and it was, after all, an idea that I'd helped to create. We were strolling through our southeast neighborhood, thinking about moving much further southeast. I was admiring the roses and bamboo growing in the yards we passed. The winter rains had given way to the dry summer season and its lovely, long warm days. When she spoke, I felt very sad. I desperately wanted Portland to work. Regardless of the reasons we weren't able to maintain a foothold there, she was right to assert that we should go where the job market wasn't fighting us, where perhaps we wouldn't fight ourselves.

I was still in disbelief. It was very hard to accept that this place would soon be in my past, that I wouldn't be staying for many years in a place that I had immediately loved. I also couldn't ignore the logic of repacking and changing our strategy. I still wasn't used to the stresses of moving, having done so little of it in the past. It would take me awhile to become familiar with the rhythms and feelings, making myself into someone who actually *could* move around, who could adapt.

With that, we began to apply for the many positions open to us in Savannah. We watched *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. We began to imagine our next chapter as southern folk and romanticized a bit about our new lives there. There were a list of question marks, many of them coming from the fact that none of us had ever been to Savannah before, but then we'd never been to Portland either. I've become convinced that the only way to really understand a place is to be there for yourself.

11. It was a lovely Portland summer, but we were spending it thinking of Georgia. Hot, sticky, sweltering Georgia. Job postings turned into applications, into interviews and offers. It

was effortless when held against the months of brick walls bruising our shoulders in Oregon. We would have jobs waiting for us when we decided to go Atlantic. The logistics of this move would be different than any other: Savannah is 2,800 miles from Portland. That is a long way to slog with an inefficient van, racking up hotel stays. We shopped for alternatives.

We found a company that rented small shipping containers, loaded and unloaded by us, moved by the company, that somehow ended up being less expensive than renting our own van and driving it. We also needed a way to reduce the cost of moving our bodies, not really being in the market for airfare all the way to the Eastern Time Zone. For this, we scraped the barrel and picked up bus tickets that would take us from Portland to Denver, where we would stay and visit for a bit before getting on a plane to Savannah. This odd combination of travel modes was decided upon and paid for, and before long there was a shipping container at the curb.

The container's diminutive dimensions were listed on the company's website, so we kind of knew what to expect, but popping the doors open on the thing made the scope of our challenge more immediately discernible. 210 cubic feet of space with a footprint of 30 square feet to fit all the worldly possessions of three people. These three people had occupied a four bedroom, 1800 square foot house not four months ago. I know I took time to explain how much stuff we had donated, sold, or otherwise shed preparing for the move, but I can do no better than those two measurements to drive the point home: 1800 square feet and 30 square feet.

As per our usual routine, my job was to puzzle our things into the container without destroying them. It took a good, long while to figure out how everything should be placed in our little steel cube. Eventually, the reality before me materialized into something resembling the floor-to-ceiling sculpture I'd envisioned about three hours earlier. To this day, I really can't understand how we did it and I wish I had a picture of the inside of the thing to prove it actually happened. Beds, small kitchen table, stools, plastic tubs, bicycles...*all* of it made it into the box apart from our traveling bags. Pieces of cardboard, old towels, anything that would provide cushioning was wedged into crevices and open areas to prevent damage from the inevitable jiggling that would accompany this container's journey.

When I swung the doors closed, clamped them shut, and

sealed them with a lock, we were leaving everything in the hands of the freight company. It felt odd to know that if this thing were to be destroyed, no one but the three of us would really bat an eyelash at the news. The last little bits that needed to be packed were the things we slept on that night, cushions between us and the floor in our empty apartment.

Waking the next morning, we rolled up our beds and added them to the rest of the eggs in our steel basket. It wasn't too much later when a truck came, a forklift dismounted from its rear, and the container was maneuvered into position on its bed. Perhaps 15 minutes total. We waved the driver off and then set about making a final check of our place. It was home for awhile but never really felt cozy. It worked for what we needed at the time. We left the keys on the counter and shuffled out into the street to catch a ride to the bus station.

WP

A bus is not my favorite way to travel. I don't think any of the three of us really enjoy it much. I'm not talking about the typical city bus, where you only need to be on board for maybe an hour at the most. Those really don't bother me. It's the long-haul buses. My biggest issue with them is the smell. It's not so much the odor of a hundred thousand travelers' bodies, their fragrances and emissions, their spills, breath, and sweat. It's not even the chemical toilet in the back. It's the rank smell of diesel which seems to permeate every material that isn't glass or metal, and even some of those. For a man who's worked around diesel locomotives for a few years and not been terribly bothered by the exhaust, this seems illogical. There is nonetheless something about the cramped cabin, a bunch of people in close proximity, and the odor of thousands of gallons of immolated hydrocarbon that immediately sets me on edge.

We had our tickets in hand and some time to kill at the depot. We would be over 20 hours inside the bus, and we milled around the station, trying not to sit down, stretching to prepare for all the ass time ahead. Waiting for a bus, you end up looking around to see who you hope isn't going to be on it and developing reasons why some people are probably forced to take one.

Finally, we swung our larger bags into the belly of the beast and swung ourselves aboard, taking our carry-ons full of

snacks, entertainment, and other miscellaneous treasures with us. Then we were running against the current of the Columbia, back from whence we came. The driver was skillfully handling the rig and the people were polite, so we began to settle in. Sabrina and I would sit next to each other for most of the trip. If it looked like Macole might need to sit next to a creepy person, Sabrina just temporarily filled up the seat next to her.

We rolled on through the night, sleeping in the half-awake way you do when you're really not able to get comfortable and a leg falls asleep every time you try. We used each other as pillows. In the middle of the night, we stopped in Twin Falls, Idaho for people to smoke, stretch, and grab a snack. The driver neglected to tell several of us that we needed to obtain a little re-boarding pass from him when we disembarked so that we could get back on the bus. When the time came to re-board, he dutifully asked to see Sabrina's. Those of us who were never given one, never really even aware one was needed due to the driver's own oversight, quickly realized we might be marooned in Idaho for an uncomfortably long time. While we played that scenario in our heads, a more dramatic one was playing out before me as my wife's increasing irritation with the driver was matched by the red-faced and quivering fat man himself.

I don't remember the exact details of the exchange, but I do remember Sabrina trying to remain calm while trying to patiently explain to Captain Bligh that no, he didn't give us a re-boarding pass and that no, he also didn't explain to everyone that it was needed, and that this situation was in no way a fault of her own. The rest of us non-pass-havers spoke up to reveal the extent of his error. While there were only a handful of us, his pride got the better of him and he pulled out his ace: "Do you want to be left here in the middle of Twin Falls?! I'm leaving and you can't get on this bus without a pass, understand?!" All Sabrina needed to do was admit that she was wrong about not being told, that she was a bad little girl, and that the captain is always right. I watched my wife, quivering herself now, not out of fear or respect, but from a strong desire to tear out this man's liver and eat it in front of him, lie to the driver and admit that she had made a mistake. He eventually relented after making us self-flagellate for calling him out and let us board without the stupid re-boarding passes.

Stimulated by irritation and bloodlust, we pressed further east and struggled to get to dreamland. Our next stop was Salt

Lake City, where Captain Poopypants was replaced with a fresh driver to take us the rest of the way into Denver. Do not misunderstand me: I'm in no way suggesting that this man has an easy job, or that he should be a coddling, always-smiling distributor of sunshine. He drives a bus. Overnight. In the far reaches of the American West. We may have caught him on a bad day. It's a good lesson, though, that sometimes you *are* actually wrong and that not admitting that fact makes you the biggest asshole in the universe.

This portion of the drive occurred much like the rest of it: rolling through the night, legs falling asleep, headphones used to drown out baby noises. Bumps in the road were transferred to sleepy heads trying to find purchase on windows.

We pulled into Grand Junction, Colorado for a bus change. In 2011, the bus fleet used to take people between Denver and Grand Junction was not the pride of the company. Our new bus featured a smelly toilet with a door that didn't like to stay closed and appeared to have several million miles of hauling behind it. Really, though, none of that mattered if the thing was in good mechanical shape, since we needed to cross the mountains and do many thousands of feet of climbing and descending. If the machine wasn't up to the task, the hills would find the weak points.

It was daylight as we pulled out of Grand Junction, the heat of summer on the western slope of the Rockies in our faces. We sailed past the orchards and vineyards of Palisade, through the canyons and up to the mountains. On the climb to the Johnson tunnel at the Continental Divide, alarm bells began ringing and the bus shuddered to a stop. Weakness = found. For about 10 minutes the driver tried to restart the engine and we all began trying to figure out how long it would take to get a rescue bus up the pass to take us the rest of the way.

The problem, whatever it was, was resolved as the engine finally turned over and we slowly plodded our way to the top of the hill. Of course, the mind then immediately begins reviewing *other* things that might be wrong with the vehicle: visions of fiery wrecks caused by brake failure, rollovers due to tire explosions, windows falling out at high speed. None of that occurred and we pulled into the terminal in downtown Denver with the faint smell of a chemical toilet lingering on the nose. Our lodging was a short walk away and our legs were grateful for the opportunity to be useful. We chose a hotel, owing to the

fact that our renter apparently didn't have space for us, even though there should have only been two people living in a four bedroom house. We brushed it off and didn't really want to impose on Jared anyway, but it was the first hint of problems in Rentertown that would eventually come back to change our plans. We took the time in Denver to see some friends, eat some good Indian food, and prepare to head south.

On the day of our flight, we boarded another bus(!), this one an airport shuttle. The coach was much cleaner than our last and at any rate the ride was much shorter, minimizing any potential trauma. We talked fondly to each other of our experiences with the bus driver, and to this day still remember him when we want to get unaccountably mad at something that happened a long time ago.

I don't remember much about the airport, the flight (flights?) to Savannah, or much else about this leg of the journey to our next new home. I only remember the arrival. We had never really been to any part of Georgia apart from some time Sabrina had spent in Atlanta. We walked off the plane and picked up our bags, heading outside to find a cab. The muggy air of late July in the deep South immediately hit me in the face, caused Sabrina to sigh with pleasure, and Macole just, well, I don't know what she did but she was not happy with the heat.

We found a car to take us into town. I took notice of the tall pine trees that lined the roads, preventing a view of anything beyond. These big, beautiful trees were a bit of an unexpected surprise. I'm not sure what I imagined the forests to look like but it wasn't the dense stands of pine I was seeing. Off the highway and into town, I looked around at the houses, the city in which we'd chosen to reside, and I had a distinct, indelible thought: *Oh, no. What have we done?*

The town wasn't scary, wasn't ugly. The feeling was just very wrong. Yes, there were some run-down houses. It was a small row of them that caused the troubled thoughts to spill out. However, one row of run-down houses does not a town make. I was hoping for the best as we pulled into our new neighborhood, unloaded the bags, and paid the driver. Giant trees lined the streets, live oaks and palms with Spanish moss dangling lovingly from the branches, closer to what I'd imagined.

We stepped past some neatly stacked empty beer cans on the porch, one of which was used for cigarette butts. Opening the lock, we entered the ground floor of an old Victorian house. Two

things were immediately apparent. First, there was a renter upstairs, presumably the smoking consumer of alcohol. Second, this place was past its prime. Where there should have been lovely wooden molding and floors there were only layers of paint. Further exploration found that the place was enormous for what we were paying, having three bedrooms, one bathroom, plus a laundry area and a sizable living room. The kitchen wasn't huge but would work just fine. There was even a small mud room with a little bit of a yard in back, although the yard was mostly gravel and overgrown with weeds.

We staked out our rooms, giving the one furthest from the sun to Macole, leaving us with the room that was right at the front corner of the house, with windows out to the porch and the next door neighbor. There was an unusable double-sided fireplace, but it was so hot that fire was the last thing on my mind. On one side of the hearth was a rusted out cover plate that struck all three of us as creepy.

One of the logistical tricks we needed to perform was planning our arrival for the same day that the shipping container with all of our stuff would arrive. Our little layover in Denver was timed to make that happen. While we waited for the truck to bring our goodies, we took a closer look at the house. The bathroom had carpet on the floor, two layers of it. Why on earth anyone puts carpet in a bathroom is beyond me, although in this case it was apparently to cover up something that probably needed work. The floor boards were noticeably loose and sagging, moving underfoot. The walls appeared to have three or four colors visible in some of the deeper nicks in the paintwork. In the kitchen, we pulled out the fridge to check underneath, only to find three or four small roaches huddled in an empty package of tea. They scurried away as we were busy being grossed out.

Fortunately, other, less ghastly creatures feed on roaches, one of them being the Carolina anole, a small lizard that we would regularly find in the house. Some people really hate lizards, probably as much as the roaches, but the anole's diet consists entirely of crawling things that tend to disgust me, so seeing them in the house made me feel like I had a friend in the animal kingdom. Over the coming weeks, I would enjoy coming out into the hall, only to see a little green creature hanging on some surface or another, scampering away if I got too close.

12. Our container arrived not long after we ourselves did, plopped in front of our house by a friendly man with a thick eastern European accent. It was time to survey the damage and see how well we'd packed the box. I was expecting a jumble of our things to come tumbling out amid splinters of wood and bicycle parts. Opening the lock and swinging open the doors revealed that pretty much everything had stayed where we'd put it, making the trip without incident. A few scuffs and extra personality showed on some of the furniture, the only real signs of how far our stuff had moved, or that it had moved at all. We set to work unloading the thing without so much as a broken picture. The shipping container did its job well. Within an hour it was empty.

The next day, we set upon the administrative tasks that needed doing, both of us anxious to get back to work. Sabrina got things arranged at the university where she'd be teaching. I interviewed and selected jobs, making the most of what was on offer. We did what was necessary to enroll Macole in the local school system and picked up some bus passes.

We became acquainted with our loquacious neighbors, who offered well-wishings and general greetings shouted from the front stoop as we walked past, struggling to be heard above the crackling hum of locusts buzzing in the trees above. It was, simply, southern hospitality. Larger cities anywhere don't often allow for this. If I would have taken the time to wish everyone a good day in Portland or Denver, I would have:

1. gone hoarse.
2. irritated a large number of passers by, many of whom need to walk past a gauntlet of panhandlers every time they set foot on the street.
3. been irritated myself by panhandlers after they mistook my greeting for a signal that I have lots of money to hand out.
4. not meant the words in many cases.

It's really a problem of scale. There are just too many people around to pretend to care how their days are going. That sounds incredibly rude, but even the most ebullient of us will quickly be drained to desert by the fountain of hospitality required to wash all passers-by in pure benevolence. Those of us who live in places like Savannah, where throwing out a "Good

day!” is just a natural reflex, are truly blessed.

Lacking in blessings were the bicyclists of the city. Bike lanes were a luxury the town couldn't afford. Travel lanes were to be “shared” with the motorized vehicles, just like everywhere else in the country. Traffic was light, for the most part, but there was usually very little room for people to get around me when I was on the pedals. I try to plan routes that feature the best provisions for the cars I'm forced to ride with, but sometimes it's impossible to find a place to ride that also offers people a good chance to pass.

Savannah remains, to this day, the only place I've ever been menaced by a dump truck while riding my bike, and this on a road which actually *did* have a second lane he could have used to pass me. Tailgating, engine revving, and horn honking ensued. Dangerous and stupid in any vehicle, when you tailgate something so small with something so large, you might as well be saying, “I want you to die.” Because if I fall, slow down too suddenly, or just need to stop, that marauding dump truck is going to squeeze out my guts like toothpaste from a tube. And honestly, if you care that little about me, my first thought is never going to be, *Oh, maybe I should make life easier for this person.*

I stayed the course, which I'm not often able to do when consumed by rage, and left my middle fingers clamped to the handlebars to avoid a nasty incident while riding on the rutted, debris-strewn shoulder of one of Savannah's city streets.¹⁸ Like so many of these incidents, the only power I really had was to not get hurt. Mr. Dump Truck Man wasn't the only guilty party here. On several occasions the residents of the city saw fit to honk their horns at me, seemingly for no other reason than their own enjoyment. They are probably the same people who like to startle horses at parades. Apart from all of that, the town was a pretty good place to ride a bike, being fairly flat and snowless.

WP

Sabrina was set for her new professorial position at Savannah State University. Macole was trying not to die of heat stroke while waiting for the next school year to start. I was

18 In these gutter-riding scenarios, I always think of the old Nintendo classic *Paperboy*, where riding over a storm sewer grate will wreck you. It has actually saved me a nasty spill on a few occasions.

playing with trains for the bargain-basement price of \$13 an hour. Our food ideals were still the same and before getting into the swing of life we spent a good deal of time both going to the beach and searching for food that our brains wouldn't reject as poison.

The beach trips were mostly fun. Tybee Island isn't far from Savannah, a lovely little sand barrier that sits in warm sea. This was a comfortable improvement from the always-cold Pacific, although the warmer water is also pleasing to jellyfish, one of which gave Sabrina its blessing, complete with welts from the encounter that would last nearly a year and traces of which still show on her leg. It wasn't too long after that Macole also felt the touch of tentacle, this time on a foot. We probably missed an important jellyfish forecast website. The ladies were not having a good day at the ocean.

When I got out of the water and put my glasses back on, I could see brown pelicans fishing in the distance. These enormous sea birds fish by patrolling high above the water and then diving beak-first toward any fish they spot. The impact stuns the fish and they become lunch. It's quite fun to watch them do it, and I'm told it's a good way to take your mind off the burning sensation of stinger cells embedded in your skin.

On another occasion, we decided to rent a car for the 30-mile trip to Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. One thing that I don't see mentioned in travel guides about this area is just how incredibly *flat* the region is. *Tabletop* is a description usually reserved for Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and places that sound air-raid sirens during spring thunderstorms. Savannah is situated on the Atlantic Coastal Plain and one is hard-pressed to find many promontories from which to gaze out at the surrounding landscape. I never realized just how stifling this is, how much my psyche enjoys being able to have some sort of a view, even if it's just getting high enough to see over the trees. I'd always lived in places where distant mountains could be seen, or hills could be climbed, elevation changes exploited to cast an eye to the horizon and see something far away. In coastal Georgia, there are no such high places. There is only forest until there is sea, which does offer a bit of relief from the oppressive opacity of pine woods on flat, sandy soil. Any psychological benefits obtained by living close to the ocean is balanced by the seasonal threat from tropical storms.

On our way to South Carolina, we crossed the Savannah

River on the Talmadge Memorial Bridge, which is the tallest thing for many miles in any direction, accessible only via vehicle. Its height allows the passage of the enormous container ships that call at the Port of Savannah, themselves large enough to qualify as topographical anomalies. For the brief few seconds we were at the top, we could actually look out and see the vast expanse of forest in which we lived. Our eyes confirmed the flatness that our brains suspected.

Hilton Head Island was very much in the style of a resort town, neat and tidy with expensive-looking houses all around. The beach was a similarly well-groomed expanse of bright sand, broad and flat, gently sloping toward the edge of the continental shelf and the crushing depths of the Atlantic. This is the sort of beach that employs an armada of sand-cleaning machines and dredges, laboriously shaping and dressing the waterfront into the too-perfect specimen of waterborne activity before us. It was here that I stepped on and picked up my very first *living* sand dollar. Every one of these that I'd seen as a child was dead, the odd wafer of calcium carbonate that I knew was found at the beach. The neighbors would bring them back from trips to Atlantic City and Cape May, New Jersey, sometimes whole and sometimes in pieces. When I reached down and picked up the velvety thing upon which I stepped, it wasn't the bleached white I was used to. Rather, it was a fuzzy sort of bloody brown, tiny hairs undulating slowly in my palm. We all found them, all thought they were aliens, and practiced a sort of catch-and-release, tossing them back into the surf to do whatever the hell something that strange does to survive.

WP

On we went, living our lives in the humid subtropical zone. The International Paper plant in town smelled like farts. So did the water. We had a neighbor who liked to stagger home late at night and piss in the weeds between our houses. Macole was pulled out of an abysmal public school system and we taught her from home. I worked beneath the swirling outer rain bands of Hurricane Irene, and marveled at the maritime activity from the town's historic waterfront, imagining an alternate life where I became a sailor.

Ally, a friend from Colorado, had a work function to attend near Orlando, Florida and we decided to check out what

the Sunshine State had to offer. Orlando, being a tourist trap, was filled with people on vacation, though perhaps not nearly as many as a typical winter's day. Much to our delight, the sidewalks were populated by lizards and frogs and we even managed to spot a few opossums. We visited another beach in New Smyrna while we were down on the peninsula and decided that Florida was a nice place to visit but perhaps not the best place to live.

Back in Savannah, cracks were starting to show in our plan. It just wasn't sticking. Sabrina's debut at college was an exercise in frustration, the student body explaining for her why it had been so effortless to get the position. As an instructor, if everyone is bombing your class, there's probably reason to suspect your teaching methods. In Sabrina's case, most of the pupils were exploring the depths of the grade scale while a few were consistently turning in good work. It was no coincidence that those higher marks came from pupils who actually *attended* regularly, and when attending were not *asleep*. Showing up really is one of the largest parts of success.

Meanwhile, our tenant in Colorado was starting to irritate us. Rent checks were coming late or bouncing. Discussions with Jared just didn't seem to do much good. The final nail in the coffin for me was a job posting at the Denver Public Library. My old shelving job was advertised and a quick call to my former boss assured me that he'd have no problem hiring me again if I wanted to come back.

Sabrina and I made the fairly easy decision to pull the plug on Savannah and Macole made no protest. My grueling twelve-hour rotating shifts, paying as little as they did, made me regret leaving a job where virtually identical work paid double the money for only eight hours of labor. We began tying up the loose ends. Sabrina was able to easily transition her class to an online program, and so was able to finish out the semester before resigning. I simply handed in my notice. We wriggled out of our tenancy and started to figure out what to do about the Hooker house.

We hadn't negotiated a lease, renting to Jared because he was a trusted family member. So we were polite when we called, offering to keep him as a housemate when we moved back in. We were looking forward to having him around and it would've been nice to have help with the mortgage. There would have been plenty of room for everyone. Further discussion revealed

that it would be impossible to share the home with them, since apparently there was no space left. How two people filled up that entire house was a mystery, though there was probably a stealthy sublet in the picture. We gave them a little more than a month's notice before we would be arriving.

Jared felt used, as if we had devised the whole thing just to avoid foreclosing on the house, which in all honesty Sabrina was prepared to do. The friendship was strained and eventually broken. I struggle to imagine how anyone could have reacted this way to what was an honest mistake on our part, followed by a genuine invitation to share a nice home. It seems like the kind of thing that gets settled over a few drinks and a punch in the arm.

This is part of the cost of our lifestyle. We've been able to see and do so much, accumulating experiences in the way that books on minimalism implore us to do: enrich your life with a focus on experiences rather than material objects. Or so the logic runs. In order to have these experiences, it has often been necessary to break contracts, make uncomfortable decisions, shake up the order of things. As ho-hum as I might be making it all sound, people generally don't decide to live this way. I wouldn't expect us to come out unscathed. Friendships have withered and reputations have been soiled. This has definitely been ugly at times.

From the rubble, reconstruction. Reinforcement. We made new friends in each new place. Some of them ended up lasting far longer than expected. I begrudgingly credit social media with keeping some of them alive and enjoyable. Even old friends, reduced to email and phone contacts, managed to keep in touch and share kind words. Most importantly, Sabrina, Macole, and I remained an unconventional unit of people, not brought together in the most typical way, not really acting as a model family must, but still laughing and living together in relative harmony. And while it lasts, I'm grateful for it.

13. Pulling into the parking area of the Denver house felt odd. When we left for Portland back in March, I had pretty much said my final goodbye to the town. Sabrina had the sense that we'd be back, perhaps supported by the fact that she still owned the house. Neither of us expected the current situation.

For this trip, we'd chosen to rent another van and drive it ourselves, a grueling, two-day, 1,600 mile run. Difficult, but lovely: it was an October venture at the peak of fall color in the

southern Appalachians. Driving through places like Chattanooga and Nashville, Tennessee on our way home gave us a brief glimpse of the eastern hardwood forests at what is arguably their most beautiful time. It was a new stretch of highway for all of us.

We took rest on the first day just west of St. Louis. It was one of the few times that I was driving and the day was stretching into 15, 16, 17 hours. I could barely keep my eyes open. A few unintentional wanderings over the rumble strips on the shoulder and we had to call it. Even road warriors need respite. We set out the next morning with the Rocky Mountains in our sights.

In Denver, I was happy to have those mountains on the horizon again. Over the years, I've come to appreciate the subtle but significant impact of having prominent jagged peaks to the west of me. A look at the landscape is all that's necessary to determine which direction I'm headed. In places without such landmarks, it is surprisingly easy to get turned around and lost, at least if you have a withered sense of direction like mine.

Turning the key to Sabrina's house revealed that there was still a bit of moving out left to do. We had been warned about that. It was very nice to be in a familiar, comfortable place again and the house was spacious enough to have plenty of room for our things. It was about one week before Halloween, and Sabrina was itching to put up some decorations.

WP

My job started in November, allowing me to get back to the people I had enjoyed working with the first time around. As good as it can feel to leave a job, it's comforting to return to folks who are genuinely happy to have you back. I spent my time working at the library and putting the finishing touches on my first book, closer to realizing my goal of seeing it on the shelves with a little Dewey decimal label on the spine.

We settled into another winter in Denver, not the best time of year to be in town, although there are definitely worse places to face the cold. Even on winter days, the intense sun streams through windows and makes for a nice place to warm up. These are interspersed with brutally bitter periods where the temperature won't rise above zero for a week or more, and temperature inversions which trap filthy urban air in the city, browning out the blue sky for days at a time, confusing

newcomers who just expect cobalt above them at all times. There are always trade-offs.

Into 2012, Sabrina had found good work as a physical trainer in a small clinic and Macole started school again, returning to old friends and a much better atmosphere than the one we had yanked her out of in Savannah. I was furiously editing the book and planning all sorts of experiments for our small garden. We took up the interior home improvement projects that people tend to do in winter.

The house, while comfortable and familiar, was a source of debate. Sabrina loved the place dearly, having bought it partially because of its location on the suggestively-named Hooker Street.¹⁹ It wasn't the perfect house and as I got to know the place better, the flaws were many. But of course you've noticed our penchant for picking out flaws.

In 2010, on the evening of a Lady Gaga concert that Sabrina was going to attend with some friends, the basement got wet. It got wet with the bad kind of water that should never be allowed to flow through a living space. It fell to me to pull up the affected carpet and the pad underneath, mop up the sewage, and disinfect the concrete floor underneath to head off any mold while everyone was away at the show.

We called in a plumber to scope the sewer line, who was able to run a camera through the pipe to figure out why it had backed up and flooded the floor. The house was a duplex and shared a sewer line with the neighbor. The part that ran out of the building to the sewer main under Hooker Street happened to go under our half of the house. That little piece went through the foundation wall, and where that happened the foundation had settled enough over the years to create a dip in the pipe, large enough to settle out chunks of debris, which would periodically block the pipe and back up into the basement. Until that dip was fixed, this would keep happening. The plumber said that this could be fixed quickly and provided us with a contact at a company that specialized in sewer repair.

Like most homeowners, Sabrina had an insurance policy. Like most insurance policies, it should protect against this sort of thing. After a quick call to the insurance people when the shit hit the floor, we were told that an adjuster would be out to look at

19 After the Civil War general, I know. But just because Dick is a nickname for Richard, it doesn't mean it's not funny.

what had happened. I suppose they wanted to be sure we weren't just inventing a sewer problem and that it was actually a covered situation under our policy. No adjuster arrived. At this point, something needed to be done, because the backup wasn't going away on its own and waiting for an insurance person to find us really wasn't our problem. We called the repair people and they came out to do what they did best.

With an enviable swiftness and professionalism, the old sewer pipe was dug out, corrections made to the path so as to avoid the troublesome dip, and the new pipe was installed. The repair involved jackhammering a hole in the basement bedroom's floor, which was fun to see. Toward the end of this day-long process, the adjuster finally arrived at the house to see what needed to be done. The insurance company had the wrong phone number on file, which was allegedly the cause for the adjuster not showing up on time. I'm not sure how having the wrong phone number means you can't find the house, the address of which is on the policy, but there you have it. We discovered that if the repair had not required punching that hole in the basement floor, none of the \$8,000 repair bill would have been covered.

In the end, the bill was covered in full, which was a great relief and restored my faith in the insurance industry. At least it did until Sabrina learned afterward that her policy was being dropped by State Farm.

I've decided against the rant about insurance that I desperately want to put here. It whines about shareholders and profits and greed and we've been there before. I know that there are probably a few insurance companies that genuinely want to help people and take pride in protecting them for the huge financial burdens associated with modern life. I refuse to believe that all of them are simply profit-centered dividend machines. I just know one of them that is.

But we were discussing flaws with the house. Another example wasn't found until around the first time we were trying to sell the place, when an inspector revealed to us that our gas furnace had an interesting and somewhat appalling issue. He delivered news of the issue by handing us a charred splinter of wood he'd found next to the pilot light of the furnace, and we were left to puzzle out how lucky we'd been that the whole damned place hadn't burned.

Interesting that the duplex was rebuilt after a fire, presumably caused by a fireplace. We often lamented that they

hadn't decided to rebuild the hearth in the new home, but thought it was probably best for the sake of fire safety.

It's not difficult to imagine a scenario in which the furnace *did* torch the house, maybe not completely, but to the point where the roof would be compromised and need an insurance claim. Perhaps it would be covered. Perhaps, though, it would be discovered that the insurance policy on the house requires furnace inspections by a certified furnace inspector every 366 days. Maybe the records of such inspection were destroyed by the fire and ensuing water damage caused by the fire department. Faced with this, the insurance company denies the claim, stating that if the furnace had been inspected as stipulated, the fire would have been prevented. Welcome to Crappington, population: you.

I'm not saying that this is the typical response to insurance claims, but I'd be willing to bet that it's common enough to end up creating a lucrative market for home repair loans and second mortgages to cover the high cost of repairs for such an event. Not everybody has \$8,000 laying around to replace a sewer line or roof and we were one thermodynamic technicality away from needing exactly that.

WP

Let me lay my cards on the table. This diversion into home repair and insurance policies explains why, as the three of us moved back into the Hooker house and time edged onward into 2012, we still had thoughts of selling the place. It has been said of homes that they are *investments*. Time spent earning money to buy one, effort expended to repair and beautify one, stress accrued defending one, and even more money spent insuring one, all of these things were justified by the idea that this place was actually going to *earn you money* in the long run. In some markets, it wouldn't even take that long. This idea of the home as investment is a relic of a time when most people bought houses, stayed in them for 15 or 20 years, possibly longer, and then sold them when the kids moved out for a price that was admittedly higher than what they had paid. There are some ridiculous housing markets where the value of a home has lost all touch with reality and a person can expect to actually turn a quick profit by, essentially, taking unfair advantage of the seller. I'm not talking about those places.

There is probably a pretty good argument that the ridiculousness of the market is directly proportional to the number of people willing to treat homes as poker chips. The people at the table in a metropolitan area like Denver may not be locals, not even people who earn median wages of the region or pay the same costs of living as everyone else. The same technology that enables all of our wandering around has created a housing market that is now national at least, and extends beyond our borders in some of the more cosmopolitan cities. A typical couple in Grand Junction can't compete with the buying power of grey-hairs shopping for a retirement home after a lifetime of earning New York wages. Housing markets on the west coast end up under the influence of overseas investors, global money that has no trouble out-bidding all comers. Prices completely lose touch with the reality of life in their region.

When all of the related costs to time and money are factored in, the money made in the sale of a home isn't impressive for most people, and in fact much of it is probably only an illusory gain, exaggerated by the effects of inflation. A home is *not* an investment. For some, having a place of one's own can be an end in itself and any costs incurred are worth it to have a place to come home to, walls to paint, a backyard to landscape. Home is a beautiful and natural human environment.

Entering into a home purchase with the intent to make money, to increase wealth, to *invest* in the structure itself and its ability to generate monetary rewards? That is a fool's game that works for some but should never be seriously considered by most people as a legitimate reason to purchase a home, at least not anymore. A home is a lifetime's worth of debt that intelligent people work very diligently to erase as quickly as possible.

These were the thoughts swimming in our heads as we settled back into the Hooker house, but we managed to enjoy our time there anyway. As winter rolled into spring and on into summer, Sabrina's finger was on the pulse of the real estate market. It usually is. She might not be holding cards or plinking chips into the pot, but she's typically abreast of the game. There were ripples of recovery from the Denver market that would allow her to sell the Hooker house at a little bit of a profit. These tiny vibrations were the nearly undetectable beginnings of the Denver housing market's transformation from mostly affordable to ridiculous. But she felt them. First, though, some tidying up needed to be undertaken with respect to both the inside and

outside of the home to make it more “appealing” to home buyers.

Understand that my landscaping and gardening choices are not everyone's cup of tea. For example, I can't stand most fences. They break up the landscape, require maintenance that I won't feel like doing, get in the way of most garden activities, and just generally irritate me. I am in no way suggesting that this irritation is rational or healthy, let alone that you should share in it.²⁰ Many buyers, on the other hand, *always* want fences around any piece of property for things like kids, dogs, nostalgia for 1950's Americana, and a vague notion of security. So be it. Amateur fence construction commenced and completed, somewhat interesting skills learned. The Hooker house now featured an enclosed area where a dog could be contained. Or a small child. I would also quickly discover that fences are good at catching and detaining wind-blown trash.

And so on with other similar projects that I was loathe to undertake and failed to understand. The money was spent and the work was done. If this was what a buyer really wanted to see, then so be it.

WP

Where do we go when the house is sold?

For us, the question pretty much answered itself:

Portland. The first time we'd gone there, we carried a ton of ideological baggage that almost entirely crippled our ability to find work. We didn't throw away the ideology entirely, merely tempering it with recognition of the sobering fact that we'd need to compromise if we wanted to earn a living. I just didn't think we gave the town the effort required to be successful. We'd found plenty to love about the place, although I've learned over the years that it's terribly easy to fall in love with *any* place while unemployed, when you're flush with all the time required to explore and enjoy. We wanted a second chance to get the job done right.

Sabrina found the time and enthusiasm to pursue further yoga and fitness certifications, making her a shoe-in for virtually any type of job in personal training and exercise. I was seeing a small surge in job postings by railroads in the Portland area and decided to apply for a few. I also expanded my search to include more acceptable jobs outside of my ideological comfort zone.

20 But you definitely should share in it.

We rang up a realtor and put the house up for sale. It was July of 2012 and we agreed on a price that would end up paying off the remainder of the mortgage with a bit to spare. At that point, Sabrina had held the house for about four years, buying when the housing market tanked in 2008. She'd planned to keep the place for much longer, anticipating an increase in value over time, but certainly not much in only four years. Still, the market was healthy and the house hadn't depreciated.

The house had three offers in two days. I'm not being hyperbolic when I say that the Denver housing market was abnormal. Back into the familiar territory of planning another move to a place we'd already been.

14. Growing among the landscaping in the front of the Hooker house was a non-native invader. Something I'd never seen near one of my homes over the years, Sabrina was quite familiar with the For Sale sign, having cultivated others many times in her past. It had now flowered, displaying SOLD to all the neighbors. The small profit made on the sale was helping to fund the move. It was a bittersweet time for us, especially Sabrina.

She had taken a fairly average home and turned it into her own place, installing a lovely hardwood floor on the main level, some other touches here and there, as you do with a home. The long axis of the house ran east to west and the neighbor's place occupied the north wall, protecting us from the worst of the winter cold. This left the south side of the home open, with several windows available to take in the abundant Colorado sunshine during the cold months. There was a deep overhanging roof on that same side of the house, which meant that during the summer, with the high, bright, simmering sun, there was shade when it was needed most. It's so easy to focus on the flaws when a home is to be sold; so easy to focus on its merits when it's gone.

Sabrina had chosen the house without any concrete ideas about moving out of it, only a vague notion that it was in a location that would probably see modest property value increases. She was mostly thinking about the long, congested commute she would undertake each workday while living in the suburbs, virtually eliminated by this house. It had been a cozy way to escape modern-day drudgery. Leaving it behind meant we could build a new life in Portland without needing to worry

about maintaining a rental here in the Mile High City. We were dismantling our Denver safety net. It also meant that we needed to get rid of some things again.

We trimmed down, spruced up, cleaned, and before we knew it the calendar would have read *August*, had we not already packed it away with everything else. There was a foam mattress topper on the floor and a mostly loaded U-Haul squeezed onto the concrete pad out back, ready for the last few things to be tucked away tomorrow morning, like a well-trained army preparing to break camp. It was an awful fire season in Colorado that year. 2012 saw huge fires near Ft. Collins to the north that had filled the air with ash and smoke, not quite as bad as the Hayman fire years earlier, but acrid enough that I was ready to wash my hands and lungs of it.

After a rough night on the floor, we rolled up the bed and packed the last of our things into the truck. We only needed to head for the title company to meet the buyer, sign some papers, shake some hands, and hand over the keys.

WP

As we made for Wyoming, an enormous plume of smoke from the burning wilderness rose to our left. It seemed that all of northern Colorado was on fire. My father was a volunteer firefighter for as long as I can remember. I never got the chance to have an adult conversation with him about what he'd done and seen. Piecing together what I do remember about him has painted a pretty interesting picture.

Dad always had a radio scanner in the house, tuned to the local public safety channels. When I began getting excited about trains, he gladly added channels that the local railroads used as well and we would usually be sitting doing other things, but we could hear the train chatter along with all the police and fire conversations, a sort of public safety hip-hop. Many times, a series of tones would go off which my father immediately recognized as alarm tones. There was need for emergency services somewhere. In addition to all the other electronics, dad had a radio issued by the fire department on the side table and it would squawk these alarm tones as well. A pager was also part of the arsenal. I learned that when the alarm tones went off, my father would pay close attention to what was being said, but maybe keep an eye on the television. It was when the alarm

tones sounded *and* the pager went nuts that the gears changed and he began to get into his role as a firefighter.

As a volunteer, it's not required to go to every single call. On the weekends when my sister and I were visiting, he would often screen his fire calls and decide not to take some of them. I can't know for certain the criteria he used, but I suspect he probably ruled out less-urgent calls that could be handled by fewer men. Many times, my dad would just walk briskly to the bedroom, pick up a few things, and then head for the truck. I remember watching him pull away with his little blue flashing light on, letting people know that they didn't really need to pull over for him, but that he was a guy going to put out a fire at one of their neighbor's houses, or pull a relative out of a crumpled vehicle.

Sometimes, dad would come back quite quickly. Other times it would be hours, and my stepmom Kathy, my sister and I would sit with the scanner on in the background as we ate or watched TV. Kathy was good at discerning what was being said and could translate some of it for us, since I don't remember being able to decipher most of it. Dad's voice would come over the scanner once in awhile, sounding every bit a part of the electromagnetic spectrum that bore it invisibly to our scanner. Kathy never went to bed until he was home, whatever time that was. He wasn't always in a good mood when he came in the door, and not until I grew up did I really understand what the man went through when he answered the call.

That understanding came to me through *Cops*. Being a man with a public safety background meant that when shows like these became popular during the 80's and 90's, my father was immediately interested in watching them. My sister and I would spend many nights at dad's with police drama as our background.

I remember one episode very vividly. The police were responding to a shooting. The victim was there on the pavement, and though I don't remember his face, I do remember that while many of the people on *Cops* had their faces blurred, this guy didn't. He also didn't have a shirt on and was very clearly dead. As the camera moved closer to the body, there was a bullet hole on the left side of his chest. I was probably about 10 or 11 years old and all this I took in stride, having seen enough action movies to know what happens when people get shot. Something was puzzling, though. "Dad, why isn't that guy bleeding?" My father, assuming that I didn't realize the man was dead, very

delicately explained to me that he wasn't among the living. I explained to him that I knew that, but I was wondering why, laying there with a hole in his chest, there was no blood. The hole was just right there, looking as if someone had glued on some Halloween makeup and just hadn't added any blood effects yet, with no signs on or around him that he had been bleeding from it. Still slightly uncomfortable about the line of questioning, dad told me that this man had been shot right in the heart, which probably stopped it beating almost instantly. If the heart isn't pumping blood, a person might not bleed as much.

When I remember that odd night in front of the TV, I realize that my father's discomfort and the reason he knew this were both because he had seen dead bodies before. Talking with Kathy about this later, my father often needed to respond to vehicular accidents. On the nights when he came home from a call looking almost angry, he wouldn't say much to us. I could tell he wasn't going to lash out, but he really needed to be left alone. Kathy would relate that many times this was because of what he saw at a crash scene or some other human tragedy. The man had to put people back together again, to reassemble the pieces of what was once an intact body for identification. He had cut open cars to get people out of them. Not that every accident was a slaughterhouse, but he saw blood often enough that it was occasionally upsetting.

Another day spent with dad found us in the Pennsylvania wilderness. He was taking my sister and me to visit a fire lookout tower, where he evidently knew the man assigned to it. These towers are typically dotted throughout remote areas so that during the fire season, someone can spot something burning before the entire forest goes up in flames. We climbed about 100 feet of stairs and met the man, who showed us his 360-degree view of the surrounding landscape. In the center of the room sat a topographical map of the area, which I found simultaneously interesting and impossible to read. There were various other items in the room necessary for the task, but the only other one I remember was a pair of binoculars. We were talking about what to look for while up on our perch, protectors of the forest. I honestly can't remember who spotted it first, but I remember seeing a small smudge of something, probably a mile away. I couldn't tell what it was and my father handed me the binoculars. Those I couldn't figure out either, so he helped me adjust them and see what was very clearly some smoke coming out of the

trees. At that point, it was probably just someone's smoky campfire, but it was difficult to tell. The man staffing the tower grabbed a radio and reported the smoke. My father was pretty proud of me. My sister was unimpressed by the whole thing.

When we got back to my dad's place, he told Kathy that I'd spotted a fire while we were up there, although that's not quite how I felt it had happened. Since I couldn't tell what in the world I was looking at and didn't have a clue how to operate binoculars, it felt more like dad spotted the fire, but whatever. We made a memory.

Rolling through Ft. Collins while looking at the billowing smoke near the highway, I thought of that day at the lookout tower. Wildfires are something that western people probably know a bit better than anybody else. East of the Mississippi, it usually rains too much. Fires find themselves smothered by the regularity of precipitation or stifled by humidity, but even Florida managed to have a terrible fire season in 2017.

Still, there is something ingrained in the people of the western states by season after season of inhaling pine smoke. During a dry spell, people hope for rain along with the lightning and thunder. It doesn't always come. The searing bolts of electricity set innumerable fires in such conditions. Humans accidentally or intentionally cause most of the others. The dry western air moves, fanning the fires into hellscapes. The Hayman fire of 2002 burned over 130,000 acres. Fourmile Canyon west of Boulder burned more than 6,000 acres in 2010, erasing over 150 homes. Waldo Canyon near Colorado Springs lost thousands of acres in July 2012. The High Park fire outside our windows would go on to burn over 87,000 acres, the gift of a dry thunderstorm. These are some of the notable fires of the Front Range, to say nothing of what's been happening elsewhere in the state since then, let alone the rest of the west. Most of the time, residents of the eastern states don't need to worry about a fire becoming so enormous that the entirety of the view from their homes turns into ash and blackened soil. Or that the houses themselves will be engulfed, awash in the incinerating sea. But weather and climate can change, as Floridians can attest. Smokey Bear has been around for a long time.

WP

Deferring to the hazy air and August heat, Sabrina went against her instincts and allowed the windows to go up, the somewhat-filtered air of the A/C entering the cab of the moving van, much to the relief of Macole and me.

In contrast to our previous expeditions, we hadn't booked a hotel room for the first leg of our journey since we didn't really know how far we'd make it. Our closing had brought us into the afternoon hours and by evening we were into Wyoming, turning west. The fires of Ft. Collins were mirrored by numerous smaller blazes along I-80. Where there was no fire, occasional scorch marks from prairie immolation could be seen. Then it was dark, the sky as black as the charred soil, and we began to think about where we would spend the night.

Wyoming is vast and open. Many highway-begotten towns dot the roadsides, supported by the people moving through. As fatigue began to set in, we made it to Rock Springs before we'd had enough and wanted to bed down. It was nearing 10 o'clock when we pulled into a hotel to grab a room. No vacancies. A second hotel was easily located nearby, among a cluster of places taking advantage of the nightly needs of weary travelers. No vacancies. Frustrated, the third hotel had two rooms left and I'm pretty sure the other car we'd seen at the other two hotels booked the last one right after we were handed some keys and moved on to our beds for the night.

We drove on through what was left of Wyoming the next morning and put our tires on the well-maintained roads of Utah. Catching I-84 at its eastern end, we drove on toward our usual stop at the Boise Co-Op to get some hot food and supplies. Idaho was just as dry as everywhere else, but occasional whiffs of smoke were the only real indication of fire. Our hotel was in Pendleton that night, which made it a couple hours' drive into Portland the following day. One of the advantages of the Portland area is that instead of the prevailing westerly winds picking up billions of ragweed pollen grains and delivering them to my nose, refreshing ocean air has been borne by the breeze. This is cold comfort for people who are allergic to grass pollen, which is atrocious in the Willamette Valley but goes completely unnoticed by the immune systems in our family. We made it to Pendleton in good time, with a little bit of an opportunity to walk

around the small town. I even managed to find a library close to the hotel.

Turning to my wife as I typed this, I remarked that I didn't remember a whole lot about this trip. She replied, "It was quick." It wasn't the slow, romantic trip of the first time, the honeymoon over. Going to the courthouse for the second marriage. We made it a little quicker, pushed ourselves a little harder to get it done. We just wanted to get there and get the truck unloaded. Or maybe that was just me. Either way, when we awoke on the final day we gassed up and put Pendleton in our rear view mirrors.

Through the Blues and into the Columbia Valley the weather clear and warm, with Mt. Hood prominently in evidence, crowned in snow and catching the morning light. The Columbia Gorge was as excellent as ever: trains and boats and dams and wind turbines and primordial cliffs of the blackest basalt, never boring. Fair weather welcomed us all the way into town, allowing a great view of the towering pines that line the highway through the Cascades. Multnomah Falls slid past on the left, with a throng of summertime tourists enjoying its shady mists.

And then it was hot as hell. Over 100 degrees hot. Hot even for Denver, and the people in Portland scream for A/C when the mercury pushes past 70. Sabrina was in heaven. Macole was already setting up meetings with friends she'd made the last time we were there. We were all very ready to get out of the damned truck.

We picked up our keys and zipped over to our new home. There was a moment of trepidation as I opened the lock, expecting dirt and grime and unpleasantness. We were all relieved to find a clean, lovely little place in southeast Portland, not too far from where we lived the previous year. Macole would be able to walk to school. There was a fireplace in the living room, a first for me, and I made a mental note to harvest some firewood. For now, there was unpacking, rearranging, nesting, and resting. The dry heat of summer was still dressed with a touch of humidity, pleasing to both skin and lungs alike. It was great to be back in the city, comfortable even. The comfort, as it turned out, would be quite short-lived, but then this book is nothing if not a litany of discomfort.

15. Neighbors. Some are closer than others, sometimes we know them by name, sometimes by smell, sometimes not at all. There are also those we recognize by sound. It didn't take us too long to realize that one of ours had an infant.

Our apartment was in a U-shaped complex of single story brick units, all connected together. Our neighbor on one side was sonically invisible, but on the other there was a couple with a toddler and a screaming infant. I'm not talking normal hungry, wet, tired, cranky screams, either. I'm talking demonic, skin-crawling 30-minute sessions, during which nowhere in our apartment was out of earshot. Indeed, I wish I were exaggerating when I say that nowhere in the *complex* was out of earshot. The kid was very obviously unhappy, but watching the neighbors through the windows revealed no real signs of abuse or neglect. I realize that comes across as creepy. We were at one of the corners of the U, so our bedroom window looked almost directly into their living room. Not to mention when a kid screams the way this one did, there's a natural inclination to make sure that it's actually in good hands. So it's more “neighbor parting the blinds” than “neighbor in the bushes with binoculars.”

Not long after we moved in, I went out with our granny cart and some tools to find stuff to burn. Last time we were in Portland, my walks had taken me through some industrial areas where it would be easy to find some scraps for future combustion. I found my quarry in a back lot and went to work with a pry bar, hammer, and saw. For awhile, I was a shirtless man in sandals, dismembering pallets with a utility bar and throwing the pieces into my little cart. When I was done, I had a cart full of nicely dried hardwood, and I left the spot cleaner than I'd found it. I stopped at a nearby park and cut up a fallen tree limb, stuffing the pieces among the rest. I arrived home with a lovely supply and stashed it in one of our plastic tubs.

Sabrina found work at a franchise gym doing some personal training, bringing in some much-needed currency. Macole started her high school classes, reuniting with old friends and making some new ones, as one does. I was an application machine, relentlessly offering myself for employment at the railroads in town whenever I could find a vacancy. While we waited for those things to play out, we were sung to sleep by the sounds of a tortured baby.

It turned into an event that plagued about four nights of every week. Evenings would begin with the child crying,

frequently when Sabrina needed to be sleeping. This would continue for at least half an hour, often longer. Sometimes it was quite late when the screaming stopped. I survived by not going to bed so early and putting on headphones. Sabrina utilized earplugs, which only partially dampened the sound. As our irritation increased, we contacted the property management people to complain about the noise. Now, before I incur the wrath of parents everywhere, let me state that I know babies cry. Sabrina is a mother. We are not people ignorant of the realities of the young ones. Even I have enough father in me to know that there was something wrong with this baby. The property people resolved to do a walkthrough of the neighbor's place just to make sure everything was okay.

They reported back to us that Isis (the baby) evidently had colic, which I found out was a mysterious digestive ailment in infants that turns them into assholes for about the amount of time we were experiencing it: hours per day, multiple days per week, weeks without end. At least we knew what it was and the parents weren't locking Isis in a pit of snakes all day. The property people also told us that the baby's crib was...wait for it...right against the wall adjacent to our bedroom wall, the very same structural entity along which our headboard sat. They also said that they couldn't do anything about the noise because it was a child, and that we could call child protective services if we wanted to pursue the issue. Sabrina and I were pissed, but there was no way we were bothering child protective services with something like this, so we just white-knuckled it.

I have no idea how the parents themselves survived, but looking in on their living room many nights revealed that beer may have been part of the prescription. Seeing the mother breastfeeding with several open beer bottles in front of her *really* raised my hackles, but I never did see her *drinking* the beer while feeding Isis. Still, put a little beer in a baby's milk and I bet it gets indigestion.

WP

I remember 2012 as the year we decided to take a trip to the beach in celebration of my birthday. On Labor Day weekend we rented a car and headed west through the hills. The farms sprout up quite quickly upon exiting the city, lasting for much of the drive to the coast. We forked south just past Hillsboro and

headed through the Tillamook State Forest. We crossed the Coast Range, a low collection of densely forested mountains. The timber industry was in evidence to both sides of the highway. The weather in Portland would be significantly wetter than it already is were it not for these mountains taking their cut of precipitation out of every air mass coming ashore from the Pacific. That water contributes to the size of the trees that were around our car, the rapid growth of which encourages their harvest for lumber.

On the west slope we descended into the town of Tillamook and saw the cows responsible for all that famous cheese. Not long after the distinctive smell of a dairy farm came the refreshing scent of ocean air. Then, after driving iconic Highway 101 for a bit, we turned off onto a slow road through the undulating cliffs of the Oregon coast. The ocean filled our view. This was the first time Sabrina and Macole had laid eyes on the Pacific. We'd gone coast to coast in less than a year.

Our destination was Cape Kiwanda, and upon reaching our hotel we realized that the beach was just outside our open patio door and the sounds of the waves filled the room. Beats the cacophony of screaming human. Walking to the beach offered a closer look at the odd offshore rock formations for which this coast is famous, evidence of the inevitable and continual erosive force of the water. It was September but the water was still too cold to get into even after a summer's worth of sun, a trait of the Pacific coast that I remembered from years earlier when I needed to don a wetsuit while surfing in San Diego. I shivered then, just as my wife shivered when she forced herself to put toes into the water, just to say she'd done it. At least there were no jellyfish. There's an enormous sand dune at the beach, large enough that some of the sand in it has been compacted into sandstone. I dug my feet in for the climb up the side and was rewarded with burning calves and a great view of the surrounding area.

That afternoon, the Oregon Dory Fleet came home, just as they've done for many years. We watched as many small boats pointed themselves at the shore, gunned the outboard motors, and bounced over the breakers toward the sand. Speed gained, they raised the propeller out of the water and slid up onto the beach upon the flat bottom of the vessel, displaying why a dory is built the way it is. They were small fishing boats, coming back with the day's catch. If they'd had a particularly good day on the water, they would blow an air horn as they maniacally assaulted

the beach. Trucks were waiting for them, ready to load them on small trailers and weigh in with fresh seafood.

The real treasure came that night in the form of a blue moon. Something woke me at about four in the morning. It didn't take long to realize that the radiant disc of our lunar neighbor was the cause, shining through our open patio door brightly enough to require squinting. We snapped a few pictures before letting it set, soothed by the sounds of the waves.

WP

I also remember 2012 as the year I learned just how beautiful fall in Portland can be. It was mid-October when winter rain started falling and the grasses came out of their brown dormancy. I remember thinking about how amazing it was that I really hadn't seen much in the way of lawn maintenance being done most of the summer, only to then hear an armada of mowers and whackers and edgers and trimmers and blowers come to life when it was nearly Halloween. The trees turned slowly, gradually acquiring color with little hurry to shed leaves. It was a drastic change from Denver autumn, in which the weather is amazing, but the fall color lasts all of about three weeks before the snows and winter browns replace cottonwood gold. I took a few walks around Reed Lake amidst the foliage, the lake itself being part of Reed College's campus in southeast Portland. Among other things, Reed is famous for a Cold War-era nuclear reactor run by the students. At a liberal arts school.

During my usual job searches one day, my old job at the railroad opened up. In Denver. I had been getting very little attention out of my applications, railroad or otherwise, for any of the various reasons employers ignore anyone. (Bad resume, spotty work history, idealistic job expectations...) I talked to my former boss, who said that he'd have no problems hiring me back. Confidence bolstered, I applied and prepared for the "Thanks, but no thanks" email that was surely coming to my inbox.

The three of us discussed the idea of going back to Denver over the next couple of weeks. Sabrina and I weren't terribly opposed to it and Macole had developed a love interest when we were last there, so moving back was favorable to her. We disagreed on some points, fought a bit, but in the end there was a sense that it might not be such a bad thing, if it happened

at all. I had at least a coin-toss of a chance to land the job in my estimation.

The backdrop for this was Sabrina's low-paying work as a personal trainer, Macole occasionally ditching school and picking up smoking,²¹ and the sounds of a screaming infant. It was a little trying. I'm actually surprised we made it through 2012 as a family. At that point, though, there was no real notion of where "home" was. I could see myself staying forever in either Denver or Portland and with that knowledge I assumed there was another, as yet unexplored place I could settle down in. Not that our travels were being made with the idea of finding The Place We Want to Live. We just wanted to see what was out there.

It wasn't too long before the railroad emailed me, asking me to interview. I was oddly happy. There was still the sense that this could easily end up in a rejection, so going through the process of flying to Denver for the interview and waiting to hear some results was long and tedious. At the end of that process was a job offer. The usual battery of drug screening, background checking, and physical abilities testing followed. While I did that, we planned the move. If I failed any one of the tests, I wouldn't get the job, and the railroad is somewhat notorious for canceling new hire training on a whim. There was no reason I'd fail any of them but the background check required an employment history, which warranted a little creativity. My explanations were evidently sufficient and I never heard another word about it.

16. Winter moves. Climbing into the cab of our loaded truck, yet again, leaving behind a city I still loved, yet again, not sure if I'd ever see it again, yet again. Not that Denver doesn't get any of my love. Portland was a love affair, a sensual, exotic green trip, panties still in my drawer. Denver was probably the closest thing to home we had and this homecoming had the promise of steady employment.

We had just broken our lease with the property

21 Scene: Sabrina and I sitting in a restaurant, eating a cheesesteak sandwich. Kids walking across the street, coming home from school. Macole recognized. Macole seen with a lit cigarette. Sabrina then witnessed opening the door of the eatery, yelling, "Yeah, I see you! You're sooo grounded!" across four lanes of traffic. Cheesesteak consumption then resumed.

management people, which was a pretty easy thing to do in Portland. Over the years, it's been surprising how different landlords are with both their letting requirements. They tend to lean one of two ways: *Live and let live* or *Eat shit, you signed a contract*. This time around, as long as the place was re-rented we owed nothing. Penalties were reasonable. They should have been paying *us* to leave for having to put up with that damned kid, but perhaps that's just my retrospective anger talking.

Then, beneath my feet was the familiar rumbling of van-on-tarmac. The X was drawn on Boise for that first leg, making for a solid six or seven hours on the road. The weather was cooperating, no small miracle in December. It was a smooth and relatively uneventful drive to Idaho, with some of our favorite road food served up hot when we got there.

The next day, weather was becoming an issue. Reports indicated that our path across southern Wyoming was being tickled with snowflakes and the hills outside of Ft. Collins, Colorado, our next destination, were also experiencing some precipitation. It's never clear just how much impact the weather will actually have, so we just fired up the truck and made for the border.

Not too far into Wyoming, we found the snow. We engaged in some light rubber-necking as we pattered past accidents at about 30, being careful not to anger the gods of winter. Darkness was beginning to fall, early owing to the date, as we reached Laramie. Here, we diverted from I-80 to Highway 287, a road neither of us had taken before that offers a shorter way to get into Ft. Collins. It's a little slower, but the interstate wasn't moving fast anyway so we took the shortcut.

287 dips and dives through ravines and hills. The storm that brought snow to Wyoming had put a coating of ice over the undulating road. The other drivers were crawling along and we fell into place with them. The drive from Boise was about 11 hours in *good* weather. We were well past that by the time we lumbered onto the skating rink that was 287. This was the time for discipline. Nobody wanted to be in that truck. Some of the cars around us were doing 20, 25, 30 miles per hour. It was very tempting to push a little faster to get to the hotel and some much needed rest. It wasn't far. Keeping the needle on 15 was the result of Sabrina's careful driving and my freaking out every time she went a little bit faster. The payoff came in the form of a safe, if belated arrival to our Ft. Collins hotel, some hot showers and

deep sleep.

Our last day would be very quick, not much more than an hour's drive to go pick up the keys to our new place in Denver's Capitol Hill neighborhood, on Pennsylvania St. We threw open the door to the back of the truck and started to unload with gusto. Macole had friends arrive who weren't much help in the unloading but they definitely improved her morale. The apartment complex was a common style for the area, a mid-century affair that wore its stairs and walkways on the outside, all covered with a little roof in the fashion of a charming roadside motor lodge. Its three stories were in an L shape with a central swimming pool. Maybe 25 units total. There was a wood-burning fireplace to help us keep warm. On that front, one of the best features of these older Capitol Hill buildings is that they tend to have hot water radiant heat at no additional cost. If you don't mind the ticking and thumping noises that the pipes typically make, I can't think of a better, more comfortable source of heat. So we would be warm that winter, if nothing else.

In the weeks following the move, we had time to get our Colorado driver's licenses and take care of all the little administrative tasks. Our place was a very short walk to two grocery stores, maybe three blocks. When the spring blizzards arrived we'd be putting on snow boots but at least we wouldn't need to drive. My start date for the railroad was January 28, 2013 and I was counting down the days. We had purchased a small Christmas tree shortly after arriving that illuminated the long nights well after the holidays ended.

WP

Ever since we sold the little blue car, we'd avoided paying for things like repairs, fuel, insurance, and all the other expenses, spending the money on bus passes instead. I won't pretend to have missed paying for new brakes or the joy of sitting in traffic. However, my return to the railroad came with the requirement that I be able to report to work on two hours' notice, sometimes traveling quite a way to get to my on-duty location. It also required that I be able to get to work no matter the weather. A car was just a necessary part of the deal, a sacrifice to be made for future stability and predictability.

We found another little Yaris hatchback, this time a red 2007, at a used car dealer in Colorado Springs. The Craigslist ad

showed that they were selling it for half of what it was worth due to some pretty nasty hail damage acquired in Texas. In the salesman's words, "There's no way to miss it. It's very conspicuous." He wasn't kidding. We went to go look at the car and my first thought was that someone had taken to it with a ball peen hammer. Every body panel had been battered by falling ice that must have been the size of baseballs. Apparently the car had been totaled by the insurance company and somehow it ended up in Colorado. Mechanically, it was a car with about 40,000 miles and a nearly perfect interior. Well, perfect apart from the shards of windshield glass distributed by the hailstorm.²² We happily paid cash for the little car and drove it to our new home on Pennsylvania Street. It didn't take long for us to christen him *Lumpy*.

Having a vehicle after three years also brought with it a strange sensation: the *enjoyment* of driving. Not needing to wait for a bus or take extra time to go places felt luxurious. The freedom to depart for wherever we wanted, whenever we wanted became a new thing once again, a teenage sensation. Now that Macole was coming of age, she would have a nice, denty car to learn the basics with. It would turn out that she was a little less desirous of such freedoms, being from a generation of people who don't value a driver's license or a car as much as Americans past. That story was still developing.

Sabrina was able to return to her job as a physical trainer and Macole began the new year back in Denver Public Schools with her old friends. In all, it was a smooth transition back to a fairly familiar life. The major exception was the sale of the house, which weighed on Sabrina heavily. It wouldn't be too much longer before we began looking to change that.

17. It was the middle of a night in the middle of September, 2013. I was moving railcars around on the Midnight Southside crew, working BNSF's Denver rail yard. The Southside usually worked close to twelve hours every night. At the time, I was on a relief job with another man, responsible for covering the off days

22 These tiny cubes of glass would be found in odd places for years to come. They were under the seats, in the cup holders, between the cushions of the back seat. There was even some glass lodged *inside* the buckle for the passenger's side seat belt, causing the car to become unaware it was buckled and sounding the idiot alarm. Prying apart the buckle assembly revealed the problem and prevented insanity.

of regular crews. The two of us ended up working three different jobs throughout the course of the week, starting on afternoons and ending with two days on the always-uncomfortable overnight shift. But I was awake and enjoying the work, so I could overlook the fact that it was three in the morning.

I remember hanging onto the side ladder of a tank car while we were rolling down the track and thinking, *This rain hasn't let up at all since I came to work tonight*. It hadn't. Colorado rainstorms can be intense but they generally do not persist. Give it an hour and it will probably be over. My bike ride to work was in full rain gear. The coat and pants were appropriate to the transitory nature of precipitation in the area, but I was positively *sodden*. This was a different category of downpour. The seams of my jacket were leaking and the side zips of my over-pants were letting in all kinds of water. The fabric of both gained about two sizes like a soggy tent. It wasn't particularly cold rain, so I mostly just laughed into the night about how ridiculous I felt and looked, riding a tank car, pants sopping and baggy with rain in a storm that just did not seem to let up.

That is what I remember most about that night: a hard, steady, unrelenting rain. It was still raining a bit when I left sometime that morning. After sleeping off my fatigue, I arose to find news stories about all the flooding happening in Boulder, Longmont, and most of the other areas on the Front Range. Rail lines had been severed by washouts in at least three of the four directions out of Denver. Portions of highways and towns were being swept away. Annual rainfall for much of the region is about 15 to 20 inches per year and by the time the storm moved on, it had dumped nearly that much or more in one *week*. Colorado soil doesn't drain water very readily, so the flooding was inevitable after the first inch or two.

Further complicating matters were the terrible fires of the previous drought years, which had destroyed the vegetation that would have helped cope with all the water and held the soil back. Mudslides in burn areas were very common. Municipal water supplies were choked by soil and ash. Even in the Hayman Fire burn area of many years before, the greenery hadn't yet recovered enough to keep tons of mud out of the waterways. It was the worst flooding many people had ever seen in the area.

I returned to work to find the rail yard covered with puddles and a sizeable lake that had inundated the lowest points

with a few inches of water. It would take a couple of weeks for the water to finally disappear, as further rains and the approach of fall meant lower temperatures and less of a chance to dry things out.

On the home front, Sabrina had been hired by the City of Denver to do some rather interesting property appraisal work. Macole was plugging away at school, staying out of trouble as reliably as any teenager could. We were all loving our little apartment in Capitol Hill, so things were chugging along smoothly.

The previous year, as we were getting ready to move out of the Hooker house, Sabrina invited me into our bedroom when I came in from doing something out back. She was seated on the bed and in front of her was what I clearly recognized as a guitar case. I was still guitarless from one of our purges. As I approached the black case, I unlatched it and flipped the lid open to reveal a lovely black, double cut-away guitar suitable for any aspiring noise junkie. We had seen it at a steep discount in a music shop on one of our Indian food excursions. I immediately went over and hugged Sabrina, but she just sort of pulled away from me with wide eyes, expecting something more.

Her look said, *Well?* but I had no idea what she was inquiring about. “The note!” she exclaimed, gesturing toward the case. Confused, I went back to the open case, where I found a piece of paper that had stuck to the lid when I opened it. A marriage proposal. I went to hug and kiss my new fiancée, who was looking much less insistent than before.

The date we had decided on for the occasion was approaching rapidly. Halloween 2013 would be arriving before we knew it, so in addition to everything else we had going on there was a wedding to plan. We'd decided on a venue earlier in the year and despite a few glitches we had a full suite of friends and family ready and willing to come to Colorado for a nice, small wedding.

The night before the big day we had a bunch of friends over for a pumpkin carving party. For several hours there was the smell of squash guts and the sight of knife wielding people in our living room and kitchen. When the last of them had left we had a room full of jack-o'-lanterns ready to stand guard over the aisle.

The wedding day itself was a fairly low-stress affair. Guests arrived both in costume and in formal wear. My running

joke of that day was that I was attending dressed as a groom.²³ Macole and her friend Jaddah were our zombie-faced ring bearers. It was a brisk Colorado evening under an outdoor pavilion lit by the glow of our pumpkins, carved in everything from the traditional to the obscene. Sabrina and I recited the vows we'd written, held back as many tears as we could, and descended into profanity when we couldn't. As we turned to walk down the aisle, we hopped over a little novelty broom. It was a lovely ceremony both appropriate for us and polite for our small gathering of guests.

Returning inside, it was a full-on Halloween party. Tables were decorated with craggy black branches underlit by creepy lights, the invention of a local florist given free license. Orange, black, and purple was everywhere. *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Hocus Pocus* played silently on a large projector screen as a selection of camp Halloween music was played by the DJ. Vampires walked around the room. There were a few of the staff of the small venue who decided to come to the event in costume adding to the fun. Neither Sabrina nor I had chosen just one person to stand with us at the altar, electing instead for a four-person phalanx to fill the places beside us as we got hitched. One of mine was Henry, a railroader who was close to retirement. He had taken the time to teach me uncountable things over the years of working with me. He confided in me that he'd never been one of the ceremonial people at a wedding and was very happy to have been picked. As one of my few steady friends over the years, I was happy to have him there. I felt like I finally had a way to repay him for all he'd done for me.

WP

At our Capitol Hill abode, most of the things we needed were in easy reach. I could ride my bike to work even when I was on call. Sabrina and Macole were short walks to the buses they needed for work and school. Most of our neighbors were respectful people, overlooking one young man who needed to be escorted off the premises by the police, after succumbing to their insistent throttling of the front door. I don't think he was dangerous, but apparently he was unwelcome.

23 Let's be honest: I still tell that joke.

Our upstairs neighbor was the maintenance man, Frank, who we discovered was a very accommodating person, not that we had many reasons to call him. We saw him constantly and built a casual relationship with him. One thing about Frank, though, was his partner.

It was late one Thursday evening in spring when I was awakened by a distinct, awful sound: someone trying to put something in our door lock and open it. Sabrina woke when I stirred and I told her what I heard as I walked to the kitchen. Macole was already in the house, so this was no one we wanted inside. I pulled a knife out of the kitchen and walked quietly to the front door. The lock was still set and we had one of those somewhat useless chains on the door as well. I kept the blade in my right hand and grabbed the deadbolt latch with the other to keep it from unlocking. The bottom of the door got the edge of my foot.

I was remembering an incident a few years ago in a downtown Denver apartment when the lock not only clattered, but *opened* just as I arrived to see a neighbor's stunned face at my being in what was, moments ago, thought to be *his* apartment. As reality set in, he kind of stuttered out a "No harm, no foul," before shuffling off to wherever he actually lived. That maintenance team ended up changing a lock.

Peering through our Pennsylvania Street peephole, I could see a person trying to open the bolt with a key and having no luck. It would turn a little, but no further. He tried for a good five minutes as I watched, hoping I wouldn't need to use the knife for anything other than tomorrow's breakfast. I remember trying to figure out what the hell this dude thought he was doing. Frustrated with being unable to open our door, he staggered away to lean on the railing, dancing to the music of the intoxicated. I then recognized it was Frank's partner, who was simply trying to get into his apartment. He was one floor too low. I relaxed a little and watched him try the lock a couple more times without success, hoping he would come to his senses. In the end I needed to open the door and tell him to go up one more flight of stairs, since we needed sleep and he was going to be *long* in sobering up. This would happen on many more nights, and every time I just needed to skip the weapon and open the door, sometimes just smiling and nodding at him, and he went on up the stairs, miraculously maintaining his balance.

WP

Our life as newlyweds was also in the category of easy things. We skipped the honeymoon and as of this writing, still have not taken one. It's just been pushed off the table so many times that I wonder if we're ever going to get there. One day, we'll venture someplace tropical, just the two of us, and call it good.

The other thing that married people usually do is buy a house. During the winter of 2013, I found myself touring homes on the market, cynical attitudes toward home ownership notwithstanding. Our realtor was a young man who probably had no idea how picky the two of us could be. Sabrina was of course delighted to have the opportunity to shop for another home and much of her free time was filled by perusing the online real estate listings to find places for us to tour. The realtor did his part by sending her ideas for places we'd want to see. Sabrina usually went straight for the house's kitchen. Macole wanted to see the bedrooms, picking out which one would be her refuge. I always wanted to see the basement, crawlspace, or other utilitarian areas to look at pipes, wires, concrete, joists, furnaces, and any other things that I felt would cost us a great deal of money to fix.

Our tolerant realtor was slowly figuring out our tastes and we were seeing fewer places each week. In the end, I never could seem to justify spending the money that was being asked for any of the houses. In hindsight, Denver's real estate market wasn't that bad, but this was going to be my first house. Sabrina was ready to buy many of the places we'd seen. I just wouldn't get on board.

This pattern persisted into 2014. We would still go look at houses and we both had steady jobs that we were enjoying. We had good pay with reliable benefits. Macole was enjoying our neighborhood, if not going to school. Sabrina discovered that she really liked doing the property appraisals for the city. I had found that while my seniority date didn't allow me the choicest jobs (I still saw more of the overnight shifts than I wanted), I was still satisfied with the work I could get, and had three weeks of paid vacation per year.

Presumably, you've read the first part of this book. You know that this isn't going to last, this period of stability and contentment.

Ridiculously, unaccountably, the idea of moving to Portland hadn't left us. There we were, considering real estate in Denver, a town we'd been ready to leave on at least two other occasions. We all enjoyed the Pacific Northwest. I couldn't shake the feeling that we hadn't really tried everything we could to stay up there. Idealism about work and fastidious housing requirements had kept us from finding a place to nest. The Perfect was keeping us from The Good.

One fall day in 2014, I had seen a Craigslist job posting for an instructor position at a railroad training school called the Northwest Railroad Institute in Vancouver, Washington. It looked like a very interesting opportunity that I was well qualified for. Earlier in the year, I had actually been courted by BNSF to do a similar type of training for employees and new hires. I agreed that I'd be interested but the railroad canceled the program and I was never able to do it.

The urge to move back to Portland was undeniable. Sabrina and I discussed it. We were getting very comfortable in Denver. If we stayed much longer we might never leave. If Portland was truly a place we wanted to set up a new life, the Vancouver job would be a perfect opportunity for me to use my railroad experience, make a decent wage, and keep us in the black until Sabrina could drum up some work. It was a now-or-never type of proposition that hinged on our desire to actually go to Oregon with a solid strategy for staying there. If that just wasn't something Sabrina or Macole were interested in, I wouldn't have even bothered applying for the job. Interested they were and apply I did.

Not long after sending in my application a response came back and a phone interview came quickly after. Mostly it was me talking about my railroad experience and what I'd be expected to do at the school. It didn't take long to receive an offer letter in my email box.

Up until that offer arrived, there was a question mark about whether or not this school would be interested in hiring an out-of-state candidate, and without any other job prospects up there we had stuck a pin in our third move to Portland. We had some thinking to do. Did we stay in Denver with our good jobs even though Denver wasn't really where we wanted to be? Would the job be enough to secure our position up there? Furthermore, we were still in a lease for a little while and it was the middle of Macole's senior year of high school. For any sane

person reading this, there is also the glaring absurdity of the idea that we were becoming *too comfortable* and so we must uproot ourselves again. Madness, pure and simple.

We began brainstorming some options that would allow me to accept the offer without costing too much money or hardship. There really wasn't any question that Macole would need to finish the semester, if not the year, before moving. Out of these discussions came the option of moving me up there first and the ladies following when the time was right. It was a risky plan that hinged upon my ability to figure out how the hell to move a good portion of our things with just a small car. That's when I started researching the idea of outfitting Lumpy with the capability to pull a small trailer, combing online sources to make sure I wasn't going to end up on a police blotter.

When we had decided that I would take the job, it was understood that there would be about two months between our moves. A reverse honeymoon, if you will. The plan was simple: get to Portland. Get a job. Get a house. That was the strategy we had laid out for ourselves, although in this case the job was coming first against all the odds. We hadn't yet tried a move where the employment was the certain part.

WP

In hindsight, I find it almost impossible to justify many of our past decisions. The feelings associated with them have changed or gone completely. A (hopefully) wiser person looks back upon the events with (hopefully) more clarity and often just scratches her head. It's like the decision to cross a frothing river on the rusty I-beam of an old railroad bridge, when a perfectly suitable walkway is nearby. It's like purposely trying to run so fast, push yourself so hard that it will make you vomit. It's like putting the tail of your skateboard on the lip of a quarter-pipe, knowing that when you stomp the nose down that there's a very good possibility of ending up a blood donor.

The fear of the fall, pain of exertion, tragedy of poor execution...all these things are compensated by the countless times one stays upright and safe. The exertion doesn't break you and somehow you just go faster, try harder than you ever thought you would. You execute your task well, gliding away from the moment with a sense of accomplishment and wonder at your own wild capabilities. I am not a motivational speaker and I'm

trying terribly hard not to shoot rainbows from my ass in explicating the inexplicable.

Our lives are our art. We've created them with an attention to the fantastic, exploiting the possibilities of three people who have the capability to be mobile, to change the scenery, to explore. Too often the lives of those around us are saddled with debt, tethered in place by habit and precedent rather than choice and suitability. As citizens of a country that prides itself on independence and freedom, it is a rare chance that anyone gets to truly exercise those gifts beyond just what to say, buy, or wear.²⁴ These aren't decisions made to be intentionally different. We're not listening to music nobody else likes just *because* it's unpopular. We come at these decisions from a wild, infantile, innocent place. It's my hope that in reading about our odyssey others will be inspired to take on their own bridges, strap on some running shoes, or pick up a skateboard and paint some goddamned skulls on it.

18. Towing with a 2007 Toyota Yaris is not recommended because “your vehicle is not designed for trailer towing.” Unless you're in Canada. With the same car. Then you magically gain 700 lbs of towing capacity. Except, of course, if you're in the UK with said car and then the towing capacity is increased to 2,315 lbs.

I couldn't fully, officially explain this discrepancy. The mechanics of the car are identical in the UK, Canada, and in the little red machine I drive. The steering wheel might be on the other side, but those rear springs and shocks, along with the frame and every other load-bearing structure on the Yaris is the same in all three places. The natural first guess as to the source of the difference is “legalities”. Except that my American manual doesn't say, “Don't tow with this vehicle. It is against the law.” It says that towing isn't “recommended”. This led me to believe that it was probably perfectly legal to put a trailer behind this Toyota and drive it wherever I pleased, but I didn't feel confident in that off-the-cuff assessment.

Understand my position here. I wanted to tow with this car. If I could do it, I would save several hundred dollars and a bunch of my wife's time and energy. It was the perfect solution to an asymmetric move, which would allow one of us to go before

24 Must...clench...to...avoid...rectal...colors...

the others and establish a foothold. I was that person. I needed this little mechanical conundrum to uncondundrum itself.

I perused online forums, every Yaris technical document I could find, and I still couldn't figure out what the hell was different about this car between the US, Canada, and the UK...

...and then I had it. The *driver*: The driver is fundamentally different in these three places. More specifically, the driver's habits and the driving culture. American drivers are typically awful, and usually the closer you live to a place with a bunch of cars, the worse you are. I am completely, irrefutably, undeniably right about this.(Probably.) In Canada, you're close enough to the US to have picked up some bad habits, but you're Canadian and Canada isn't as populous. There are many miles of open, uneventful road to drive in Canada. You also have a far less aggressive streak in your country than us crazy southerners. In the UK, you're lucky to even own a car since transit is relatively popular and effective, not to mention the cost of fuel and taxes. And if you do own yourself a 2007 Toyota Yaris, you are probably very careful when you drive it. Caution is a stereotypical British virtue for a reason.

Obviously there will be exceptions, but this had to be the answer. If you tell an American that a Yaris can tow 2,315 lbs, that person will hear "around 2,500 lbs". Never mind that it's completely free-wheeling weight behind a small, light car. Our intrepid little American tower will also be driving as fast as the engine will pull with the accelerator fully depressed. Let the automatic transmission figure it out. Stopping is for babies. That little bit of wiggle you feel at 65 mph? Don't you worry about that little guy, that's just the...and now you're jackknifed in a ditch, the contents of your rented trailer strewn about on the windy Wyoming plains, gathering a light dusting of snow, lawsuit pending with the hitch company citing inadequate safety features.

Americans can't drive.

WP

This time, I'd landed a good job that started in the middle of November. Our lease was up in April. We'd just celebrated our one-year wedding anniversary in October.

Nobody was forcing us to do this. I wish I could

adequately explain what happens in our heads when we undertake these adventures. I suppose I could just shrug and call it wanderlust, but I don't feel like that's it exactly. We seem to have the blood of pilgrims, refugees, and nomads, one part looking for new adventure, one part trying to improve our station in life. We're not miserable or disadvantaged where we are, but the call of that frontier, that new place is siren song. The money and resources we've put into these pilgrimages is probably beyond a prudent amount. Most of the time, we can't take our jobs with us and none of our friends have followed in our tracks, probably to their benefit. We uproot, re-plant, and try to set fruit in our new place in the sun. When the fruit is bitter we do it again. It's familiar but never the same.

Now that I think about it, the aforementioned money and resources probably add up to less than many people spend on a monthly cable bill. It's not uncommon for folks I know to put \$1,500 into that expense alone every year. That's enough to fund a move. We do the work ourselves, we drive the truck, and we live light enough that the truck isn't huge, so our costs might be less than the norm. Car payments for a modest vehicle would add another \$2,000 per year. Maintenance is a wash, since both the leased car and our little Yaris need that, although here again, I do simple repairs myself and parts on an older car tend to be cheaper.

I want to deliver the idea that our mobility is more than just a psychotic compulsion, all appearances to the contrary. We're not blessed with much disposable income. This will scan as very motivational-poster-chic, but small steps, taken deliberately, will add up to a journey. Just between our decision to buy a reliable, used older car and not buy cable, we've effectively given ourselves a \$3,000 raise.

None of these things are beyond the abilities of most people. Just about all of them, though, require a change in mindset and an attitude of frugality. I've worked with some dudes who wouldn't be caught dead in my little red car. They have truck payments. The ones that don't are paying double what I pay for gas. People are still sometimes flummoxed by the thought of a home that doesn't have a television, even after telling them that we use our computers to the same end.

Mindset can be very tricky. Escaping the traps we set for ourselves when we buy a car or fill up a home requires cunning and the ability to poke fun at our own foolish humanity. Some

will find this more distressing than enjoyable. You can guess that I swing toward the latter.

WP

I bought a hitch that year. I read enough convincing evidence to push me into the trailer-towing community. Turns out, there's a bolt-on hitch kit for our car and it's rated for 2,000 lbs. I'll never pull that much with it but at least it will take the abuse, in theory. Mounting the thing wasn't terribly difficult and was accomplished by me laying in the gutter outside our Denver apartment with no special equipment, until I needed to *tighten* those bolts to the required torque. A quick appointment for routine maintenance at the Toyota dealer and an, "Oh, by the way, could you guys torque the hitch to the specs on this sheet I just happen to have here?" and we were in business. They were gracious enough to not charge extra for the chore, although I can just hear the mechanics wondering why on earth anyone would bolt a hitch to a Yaris. I suppose there are plenty of bike racks that need hitch mounts, so maybe they just thought it was cool. (No they didn't.)

Hitch mounted, next came the lights. Back to the internet I went to figure out how to connect the wires. I found a really handy tutorial at yarisworld.com which seemed to be the closest thing to my particular needs and decided to give it a whirl. Interior trim panels were removed, wires were found and spliced. That done, I had no way to test if I'd actually been successful, so a quick trip to a U-Haul dealer was in order. They let me hook up to a trailer and connect the wires to make sure it worked, and with a smile from the gods, everything was functional.

This is a long detour into the world of automotive maintenance, but hear me out. I'd never done this before and didn't know much about it until I needed to consider an alternative method to get our stuff from Denver to Portland. With a little help from people with some specialized equipment, this was well within the capability of just about anyone who isn't afraid to do a little research and handle some basic tools. The hitch place would have mounted this for me and I'm sure I could have paid someone to do the work on the wires, but it was honestly kind of fun. Or at least, due to the oddities of human memory, I only recall the fun I had doing it and have long since forgotten the frustration and knuckle dusters. You won't always

find a clear “YES, YOU CAN ABSOLUTELY DO THIS” answer to many questions. Sometimes you just have to put on the big kid pants and give it a try. You won't always get it right, but you will *always* get a story.

WP

Moving day arrived. I obtained the interior dimensions of the trailer and made a mock-up of it ahead of time in our living room. I had an idea of what I wanted to fit in the thing, but I was also paranoid of, well, everything about this idea. I wanted this to go off without a hitch, as it were.

I selected a U-Haul 4x8 trailer, which by itself weighs 850 lbs according to their website. With a self-imposed 1,200 lb limit (half the weight of the car), my trailer weighed more than the things I loaded it with. Those things were the bulky, pain-in-the-ass items that made more sense to load as a team. I'd just need to figure out a way to get them out when I arrived.

Driving the trailer to the apartment, everything seemed just fine. There was the added noise of a bouncy empty trailer but the car didn't seem to mind. The loading was easy. I took my time with it and made sure it was as balanced as I could get it, because while the online literature regarding use of a trailer was widely varied, the information about weight distribution was nearly unanimous in describing its criticality. Estimations completed, the door was sealed.

I needed a test run. I wasn't leaving until the following day, so I wanted to get the thing out on the highway to make sure this wasn't the worst idea I'd ever had. Acceleration? Much slower. Ride quality? Remarkably better with the loaded trailer. I was amazed how much smoother the car rode with a full load like that. I'd driven heavy trucks that exhibited this quality, so I guess the phenomenon scales with the size of your “rig”. I took it up to about 50 mph or so, stopped to make sure all the bolts were still tight, chains and welds still intact, and so forth. Bringing it back to the apartment, all seemed in order.

I was in a state of wonder that this was happening. Just a stupid little mechanical modification felt new and exciting enough to be novel. There was also the slight anxiety of an impending drive of over 1,200 miles with this wacky setup. It tested fine in good weather, with good roads, and over a short distance. The journey itself was a different thing. That night, I

slept on the top layer of our bed, next to my wife, as we've done on many a moving day's eve.

I woke with the slight discomfort of the improvised mattress that I was regrettably leaving to my wife and got ready to take the trip, to leave my family behind for a couple of months. Still nervous, still excited. We loaded the car this time, largely with things that I'd need, and also some of the more fragile items that are just a pain to keep from breaking in a moving truck. That done, there was nothing left to do but hitch up, say goodbye, and spend a holiday season away from the most important ladies in my life.

19. As I turned out of the alley behind our Denver apartment, my wife went out of view behind me. The car was laden with all sorts of things, from a guitar amp buckled on the passenger's side to the toaster rattling away in the back. Trailing all of that was the little wagon hitched up to the car, filled with even more goodies, mostly furniture. There were snacks ready to hand, a bunch of fruits, veggies, and starchy things for the trip. Microwavable burritos were in the mix for the hotel stays. I had a loaded mp3 player, but left it off for a few hundred miles while I listened for signs of trouble with my trailer.

Day one was Denver to Ogden, Utah. I'd booked a hotel in advance there, since I don't like searching for places to sleep when I'm tired. These roadside hotels fill up fast if the highways close and the Yaris is not very sleep-able even when it's not packed to the roof with possessions. For this leg, I'd chosen to head north out of Denver and use less-mountainous I-80 across Wyoming. On day two it would be all the way to Boardman, OR on the Columbia. The final day was slated for my arrival in Portland.

I left the traffic of Denver behind me, cruising north on I-25. Well, not quite behind me, since these days Denver traffic is disgusting and has splooped all the way to Fort Collins and beyond, a distance of some 65 miles. If it wasn't behind me, it was at least moving steadily.

My first stop came about 50 miles north of Denver, and mainly because I needed a latrine. I haven't yet mentioned that I left town immediately ahead of the first serious winter storm of the season. It was only the second week of November, which isn't all that early for heavy weather in this part of the country. October snowstorms are a part of the local lore. The Rocky

Mountains eliminate much of the predictability that is already in short supply for meteorology in most of the rest of the states. Storms can arrive very suddenly and occasionally they surpass what the weather people predict will happen in terms of brutality and severity by a wide margin. This particular storm was well-predicted and was one of the reasons I chose to go through Wyoming instead of straight west over the mountain passes. The weather up north would still be rough but the mountains would probably be worse.

As I stepped out of the car at a gas station, the wind had shifted out of the northwest and was quite a bit colder than when I left Denver. The sun was still shining, but coming over the mountain tops were the dark, ominous layers of clouds that told me I was getting out just in time. If I was lucky, I-80 would only get a dusting of snow and I'd sail right past it all.

I crawled under the trailer with an adjustable wrench, tapping things, checking the hitch bolts and all the rest, making sure that I hadn't yet rattled something loose. Everything looked perfect. I figured one of two things would happen with this trailer gambit: I would either break something and cripple the car before I left the state, or it would work flawlessly and I'd be amazed that there were so many voices online proclaiming how stupid it was. I wasn't out of Colorado just yet, but I already felt happier knowing that there wasn't an immediate problem. Trailer checked and fluids drained, I hopped back in and took off, slowly, for Wyoming.

20. Driving through Wyoming is always a little tricky in winter. I suspect that people in Nebraska and Kansas know exactly how to relate. It may not be snowing all that much, but the relentless wind tries to push you all over the road. Just a little bit of snow can pack into ice very quickly and it's especially nasty when the sun peeks out for a bit, melts some of the snow, and then the icy air is immediately there to freeze it solid. Snowdrifts turn one inch from the sky into one foot of accumulation.

Heading west on I-80, the weather was reasonable. I could see the storm I dodged in Denver and I could feel the wind. The car handled very well with the extra weight of all my cargo, one less thing to worry about. I was becoming increasingly worried that I'd not be dodging the storm much longer, though. The clouds and the telltale signs of distant

precipitation filled the horizon ahead. Icy layers of cirrus began to screen the afternoon sun. I knew the thing was moving toward me and that the chances were now nearing 100% that I'd see how the rig would negotiate slippery roads.

The snow began falling somewhere west of Laramie. At first, it didn't stick and the roadside was dusted while the pavement stayed black. Passing Rawlins, it was getting darker and the snow was getting steadier. The reason for this is plain enough: the Continental Divide is between Rawlins and Rock Springs. Technically, you cross the divide twice and the highest point on the entirety of I-80 went under my tires before I slid through Rawlins. I know it as Sherman Hill, as the Union Pacific Railroad calls it. Sherman Summit is the more commonly known name at 8,640 ft above sea level. It sounds scarier than it actually is, since Wyoming is already at a fairly high elevation, but just a little elevation change can squeeze the moisture out of weather systems, just as the divide was doing on this drive. Many mountainous areas of the Appalachians stand at only one or two thousand feet, but the difference in weather from the top to the bottom warrants recognition.²⁵

The Continental Divide runs north to south but where it splits in southern Wyoming it forms an oblate ring. Water doesn't actually flow out of this area, called the Great Divide Basin. Any water that falls there will stay there. Any water that leaves must evaporate. Not truly a problem in dry, windy Wyoming, but it's a neat geological curiosity that appears elsewhere in the west, the Great Salt Lake being the most notable example.

The snow had picked up enough to force me to slow below 45 mph and my first long-term test of the four-way flashers began. The limit was 80 mph and the conditions hadn't been such that I would've tested that, although the trailer had been handling flawlessly behind me.

Sabrina and I have seen, time and again, a highway phenomenon during bad winter weather. When storms whip up over the road, the most dangerous time is immediately after the snow starts falling and the wind starts howling. People don't adjust their driving quickly enough to react to the changing conditions. Just behind the leading edge of a storm, the telltale

25 I remember the name of the process instrumental to this phenomenon, if not how it works: adiabatic cooling. Cheap and dirty summary: air cools as it rises over mountains, hills, and the like, reducing its ability to hold onto moisture, which then condenses and falls out of it.

signs of careless driving become evident: here, a sedan slid off into a small but crippling mound of blown snow. There, an SUV on its roof in a ditch, its trailer askew and the off-road toys it was carrying hurled some distance away. Further on, more cars sidelined, some by collisions with one another, and some tractor-trailers, jackknifed or otherwise physically disabled by mechanical trauma.

I once watched, on a highway in southern Colorado, as a nasty cross wind developed on a hot summer day. It was racing nearly perpendicular to the highway, with me and my four friends feeling the push. We were on our way to the Pueblo Reservoir to swim, a bunch of Army dudes going out for the weekend. The truck in front of us was probably just on the way to pick up another load, or maybe even on the way home. The dust was flying horizontally. We could see the trailer rock once, twice, and then the wheels on one side left the ground. Fortunately, it was a divided highway with a good-sized median ditch which bore the brunt of the impact when it hit the dirt and skidded to a stop on its side. Had it gone into opposing traffic, things might have been more interesting. We were far enough behind it that we stopped easily and ran up to see if we needed to help. Just in the minute or so it took us to get there, the driver was already out of his seat, sitting on the side-become-top of the cab calling for help on his cell phone. He was just fine.

The point is that when the conditions start changing, you can't fart around and wait to see if things will get better. Sometimes you will just get caught off guard, as I suspect the driver of that truck did. Other times I will be driving 40 mph with flashers on, looking at a wall of snow ahead, rolling on a quickly whitening strip of road, and people will be bombing past at the posted speed as if this weather hasn't been happening for the past 30 minutes.

So the winter highway has its jewelry of broken glass and twisted metal, some of the adornment added by misfortune and some by foolishness. I was seeing this through my windows, solidly determined not to end up on the side of the road. For the most part, the drivers around me seemed to agree and we were slowly, deliberately making our way forward.

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It was nearly dark and the snow squall I'd driven through had left for points east, leaving a couple of inches behind it. The advantage of traveling west in the US is that the weather typically moves the other way, so you're not perpetually trapped under a storm like a 1950's cartoon character. The traffic was creeping along, and my decision to skip Rawlins as a fueling stop in favor of the more distant but reachable Rock Springs was haunting me. My digital fuel gauge had been blinking at me, its last bar signaling a gasoline shortage. With Lumpy, that one bar will probably go 40 or 50 miles, but I'd already driven 35 of them and Rock Springs was still about 5 miles ahead when the highway traffic just stopped dead.

Owing to the slow slog through crappy weather, I'd been on the road for six hours, and Ogden was at least another two. It was quite cold and that last fuel bar had now begun flashing more insistently. *I'm really serious about this gas shortage thing.* Stopping on the highway wasn't what I wanted to be doing.

The digitized voice on AM traffic radio confirmed what I suspected: an accident ahead. Massive credit is due to the people responsible for thinking of, and then operating that traffic radio station, by the way. Pretty much every US highway has some type of low-tech, AM-based driver information system which has saved us some time and trouble over the years. If it hasn't saved us the time, it has at least allowed us to know *why* there's a line of tail lights stretching to the horizon, immovable and mocking in their ignorance. No need to burn data on a phone plan for that.

For this little quandary, there was a detour available through the Springs, which worked for me since I need to go fill up the car's tank and empty my own. We advanced on the snow covered evening road, the other drivers and I, creeping our way the final miles to Rock Springs. When we stopped, I turned the car off to make sure I didn't run out of gas. I began running a plan through my head for what to do when my little Yaris sputtered to a stop. It wasn't too far to walk into town for a jug of fuel, but the temperature was below 20 degrees. I had plenty of winter clothing with me. Had *all* of my clothing with me, actually. It wouldn't be a huge catastrophe but it would definitely turn a long day into a longer one. I really didn't care how long it took to make Ogden. I was on road time and it wasn't like I had

an appointment to get to. If I needed to pull over and catch a nap, so be it, but Ogden was where I was spending the night, dammit.

To give a sense for how slippery the road actually was at this point, I'll relate a small but significant event. The serious mountain passes of Wyoming were behind me, the grades near Rock Springs gentle by comparison. When I say serious, I still don't mean that they're as serious as those to the south on I-70 in Colorado. Those are some of the steepest and highest on the entirety of the interstate highway system.

Even so, as I pulled the trailer up a short stretch of hill at less than 20 mph the drive wheels on the car broke loose, and the speedometer registered the wheel slip with a flutter up to about 40. An aspect of hauling a trailer that hadn't considered until then is that a front wheel drive car like mine needs weight up front. The engine normally provides all the weight you could ever want. By putting extra weight on the back of the car in the form of the trailer's tongue weight, I was lightening the load on those drive wheels. I downshifted the automatic transmission to make the wheels less spinny, improving things somewhat.

My little car faithfully hauled its load up the slope and I proceeded, a little wiser, the rest of the way to Rock Springs. Taking the exit for town, there was a gas station mercifully close and I breathed a little easier knowing a long, cold walk wasn't on the cards. There was a line at the gas station and no bathroom, plus I couldn't really find a good place to shimmy under my hitch to inspect it. Leaving the station, I found a dark side street suitable for both tasks.

Cold weather is murder on metal parts. Heat tends to make metal more bendy and soft, while the cold makes it brittle. Looking at all my chains and bolts, I could see that the hitch idea might have actually made sense. Everything, while covered with some road slop, was just as secure as when I left Denver. I expressed my relief on an invisible patch of street and wondered aloud why it is so damned difficult to find a public bathroom sometimes.

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Through the icy streets of Rock Springs and back to the highway. Traffic radio told me I'd be able to come back out on I-80 past the wrecks. I didn't really know how to get back to the highway beyond what the roadside signage told me, but Rock

Springs isn't the size of town that gets drivers lost.

Shocking that I didn't have a road atlas in the car. I am probably among the last generation of Americans that wouldn't think of going anywhere without a map handy. At least, I can remember always having the map around. I've fallen out of that habit as so many of us do, since Google gives me my directions. I can't stand GPS devices, but between the two of them Google and the GPS have probably taken away most of the market share once enjoyed by road atlas makers. Planning a route is as easy as typing and reading anymore. No longer are we required to look for the little markers that indicate exits, the triangles representing rest stops, the tiny arrows indicating one-way streets. I remember moving to places not that long ago and being excited to receive a phone book, since they usually have good local area maps. I feel like such a curmudgeon-y old fart in saying that, but there exists now a great many of us who have just forgotten how to read a paper map. I'm also a little defensive about the fact that I am becoming one of them.

As ever, it's the driver's decision. I am far from anti-technology, but it's slightly unnerving how dependent people become on the GPS for simple wayfinding. Sometimes, the technology is just going to fail and we need to know what to do when that happens. That, and Google sometimes gives really crappy routes.

Me and my mapless ass had found our way back to I-80, westbound for Ogden. I had indeed left the accidents behind and the roads were still fairly slick. The condition improved as I made my way into Utah, and so I began to experiment.

The trailer had handled very well. No shimmy, no odd pulling or swaying. I'd had it up to 55 and 60 mph with absolutely no trouble. In front of me was an open, dry stretch of roadway with an 80 mph limit. On a nice downgrade, I tested how close to that I could get. And? Absolutely nothing happened. The car sailed along at 75, as fast as I dared to go, taking all the bumps in stride and still not a whisper of anything signaling to me that I should've slowed down. This must be the overconfident feeling that precedes all reckless driving accidents. My prudent side took over again and I decided that while U-Haul stencils their trailers for 55 mph, I'd settle for between 60 and 65 without any trouble. It was dark, I was tired, and I was very grateful to have full confidence in the ability of my tires to grip the road surface.

So it went, all the rest of the way to Ogden and the end of a long day of driving. I can't remember how many hours it was but I do remember feeling very relieved that everything held together. I nuked a burrito and took a shower before watching part of the newest *Rambo* movie until I just wanted to sleep.

21. It wasn't even sunrise as I set off on my second morning of driving. The sun was beautiful and behind me. This portion of I-84 is actually quite uneventful. Ogden sits at the northern end of the metropolitan area that includes Salt Lake City and Provo, so once you leave town, there's not much in the way of large settlements or traffic until Boise, some 300 miles distant.

The day's itinerary can be gently described as a meat grinder. It's about 560 miles to arrive in Boardman, OR, which takes a normal car about 8 hours. My trailer and I had not and would not be traveling at normal car speeds. I should explain my transaxle health plan now.

For the uninitiated, a transaxle is the thing that takes power from your engine and gets it to the driving wheels. Specifically, the transaxle is what is usually used on vehicles in which the engine is on the same end as the driving wheels. I have an engine and two little drive wheels up front, so I have a tranxaxle up there too. If the engine is on a different end from the driving wheels, you probably have a transmission which turns a longer driveshaft, responsible for taking the energy of the engine back to a differential on the rear axle to turn the wheels.

Protecting this piece of equipment was second in my mind only to preserving the brakes. Lumpy isn't designed for heavy hauling, so I needed to be very careful how hard I ran the car. It's an automatic designed for getting around town, so good ways to destroy it include driving too fast with a heavy load, trying to pull a load up hills using too much throttle while trying to maintain such a speed, and over-revving the engine while downshifting to descend hills. As a result, my trip has been marked by dozens of hill climbs where the car starts slowing down, and I just allow it to downshift itself until I find a speed I can maintain without flooring the gas or making the car lug uphill in too high a gear. When I get below 45 mph, the flashers go on and I usually end up in a line of heavy trucks that have the same issues on hills.

It's tempting to try and push the gas pedal further to get more speed, but it's like riding a bike up a long hill. Unless

you're a Tour de France rider (the equivalent of a light, overpowered sports car), you will select a gear that's low enough for you to pedal while seated, something that will allow you to move steadily up the hill. Trying to do this in a gear that's too high will destroy your knees. So you just find the gear that works for your body and the hill you're climbing, and that's the speed at which you ascend. Strictly following this procedure on the bike will make your body happy. Strictly following this procedure with Lumpy enabled me to travel many miles without the sounds of grinding metal and the smell of burning automatic transmission fluid. Automatics are supposed to take care of all the gear selections themselves in a manner that doesn't tend to destroy them. Once you understand how the transmission works, though, you can give it some help by not asking it to do things it probably shouldn't.

Going down hills with an automatic can be strange when hauling a load. There are lower ranges for the transmission in this car, like most others. Toyota recommends using these when going down long hills to allow the gears to take some of the work that the brakes would otherwise be doing all alone. So far, there have been maybe one or two descents that have actually required me to downshift to avoid riding the brakes. The others I was able to handle, to my surprise, by just taking my foot off the gas pedal and drifting down the hill. I have no idea how the hell the car did this so well.

Despite all the good tests done to get to Utah and an earned reputation for reliability, I was still nervous about taking the rig over Deadman's Pass. This was on my mind while rolling along through the edge of the Great Basin on my way up to Idaho, but I had a few hours of driving before I needed to face it. The highway traffic had made subtle changes: trucks filled to the top with taters were now on the roads, sometimes in force. Onions rolled along toward hungry people all over the place in trucks of their own. Idaho license plates.

All along the route I flirt with the Snake River, crossing it several times. West of Twin Falls is my surprise canyon. This amazes me every time I drive over it and part of the fun is that I'm never quite sure where it is. I know I'm getting close when I see black, basaltic rock peeking up through the earth all around the road. There was once quite a bit of volcanic activity here. Underneath the geologically active part of Wyoming that we call Yellowstone National Park, there is a plume of hot material in

the earth's mantle. It's believed on good evidence that the plume is the cause for all of the geysers, hot springs, and all other sorts of geological wonders found in the park. The plate upon which North America rides, the plate that *is* North America, is drifting over this hot spot.

About 15 million years ago, the portion of the North American Plate we call Idaho began a slow slide over the plume, lasting about 11 million years or so. As a result, Idaho is littered with old cinder cones and remnants of volcanic activity like the beautiful black rocks that serve as my landmarks, and most of it is right along the southern corridor now traced by the interstate. Craters of the Moon National Monument and Preserve lies just north of the highway in this part of the state, and for all appearances you'd be forgiven for thinking a volcano erupted yesterday. Massive fields of beautiful, forbidding rock, straight from the bowels of our planet greet you at the Monument, always a surprise to those of us not in geological circles, since volcanoes are typically remembered as Hawaiian or Icelandic. Italian. Granted, these American volcanoes are long since gone but the scorched earth left behind will remain for generations. Mount Saint Helens is recovering faster, honestly.

Volcanic rock has a habit of forming some of the most wonderful soil for farming. Something about the minerals. You need to wait for it to break down, of course, but Idaho's had a few million years. I suspect those amazing black boulders and outcrops I'm seeing on my journey also have a tendency to break farm implements and cause no shortage of headaches for farmers here, but such is the agricultural life.

The surprise canyon was upon me. Near Tuttle, Idaho, the highway crosses Malad Gorge and if you blink you might miss it. It's only a couple hundred feet across and at highway speeds it's easy to go right over the top without taking your eyes from the road. Looking out the side window, though, is astonishing. You're greeted by the sight of a cleft 250 feet deep and while narrow where the highway crosses, it widens significantly to the southwest. One would think that in this area, any topographically sexy feature is just another gift of the mighty Snake River. This, however, is the Malad River near its mouth, where it empties into the Snake. There's a state park if you remember to notice it and want to stop for a longer look. The surprise here comes from the many miles of normal, unremarkable farms and features you'd expect along a western

highway. The bridge over the chasm barely registers as a bridge when you cross it. I don't want to build this up too much, but it's one of my favorite features of this part of the drive. I reiterate: Idaho is beautiful. I'm sure North Dakota has its moments, too.

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It's not too far past Boise that I enter Oregon. I skipped the usual stop at the Co-op. Enjoying the food there without the ladies somehow feels like a betrayal, as if it's *our* spot. It's not too much farther that I cross the 45th parallel, halfway between the North Pole (geographic) and the Equator. There's a run-of-the-mill green highway sign marking the location in the rolling hills and vast plains of eastern Oregon. I now roughly share latitude with northern Vermont and New Hampshire, northern Wyoming, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Fortunately, through a quirk of being close to the Pacific Ocean, this part of Oregon doesn't share the climate of those places.

That said, there is a radical difference in weather between eastern and western Oregon, more pronounced than in most other parts of the country. Washington is very similar in this regard. This is primarily the result of having the Cascade Mountains, which wring moisture from the wet weather systems coming off the ocean, leaving far less precipitation for the land on the eastern side. Most places with significant elevation differences tend to do this, leaving the windward side soaking and the leeward side comparatively drier. Many variations exist. This is the "rain shadow" talked about in meteorological circles. And also by nerds who write books discussing weather conditions a little more than is prudent.

Oregon also has the Blue Mountains in the northeastern part of the state, which predictably affects any weather systems passing through. The Blues are typically wetter, colder, and foggier than surrounding areas, as you'd expect, the perfect breeding ground for The Humongous Fungus. The conditions are such that in this part of Oregon, there is a fungal colony that's been estimated to be well over 2,000 years old. It may be one of the largest living things on the earth and covers over 3 square miles, mostly underground. *Armillaria ostoyae* blooms in fall, until which time you'd never really know it was there.²⁶

26 Schmitt, Craig L., and Michael L. Tatum. "The Malheur National Forest: Location of the World's Largest Living Organism (The Humongous

The path through the Blue Mountains makes for a winding, enjoyable ride with excellent scenery. There are some barren, rocky and brown slopes, as well as some heavily forested areas with beautifully tall evergreens. When dusted with snow, the bright white highlights accentuate the rugged elegance of the place.

Before me were warning signs for Deadman's Pass, so I took the opportunity to pull over and check my equipment before taking the plunge. I'd been doing this regularly for the entire trip but not nearly as frequently as I originally planned, owing to the exceptional performance of the whole thing. I was under the whole car this time, looking mainly at the brakes just to see if I could find any anomalies. Nothing. The trailer, apart from being more grimy than when I started, was in perfect shape. Not even so much as an under-inflated tire. All the connections were secure, all the lights still worked, and soon there was nothing left to do but get back on the road and let gravity have its way with me.

It was a clear and chilly evening and the sun raced for the horizon. I crested Cabbage Hill and down we went, my little rig and I, merrily on our way to Pendleton and points west. I'd downshifted to third out of a possible four gears and the entire way down, Lumpy and I drifted slightly under the speed limit, keeping pace with the heavy trucks. Not once did I need to touch the brake pedal. It was a lazy float down to the Columbia River valley marked with the stunning views of impending sundown that I expected to see. The valley floor was far below me but rising as fast as the highway engineers of I-84 planned. I rounded the hairpins, doubling back and twisting around until I'd found the apex of the final curve, and it was done.

I clicked the selector into *D*, the “automatic transmission's choice” position, and goosed it a little bit to get back with the flow of traffic. Pendleton sailed past my windows as darkness descended.

The air had changed over the miles from the dry, crystal clear of the American west and there was now a haze to it. The Columbia was near. The interstate made a slight left turn and I arrived in Boardman, a waterfront town of 3,000 people. I checked into my hotel room, which smelled slightly of dog. The

Fungus).” usda.gov.

https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fsbdev3_033146.pdf
(accessed February 17, 2019).

first thing I noticed is that extra moisture in the air. My nasal passages and lungs drank it up like a thirsty desert-dweller. Denver's not quite desert according to the Koppen scale, but it is designated as *Bsk*, which is Koppen-speak for semi-arid climate. At any rate, the air my body was accustomed to breathing has about 30% humidity or less most of the time and the nearby river was very apparent. I could taste it and feel it in my lungs.

Denver has the South Platte river, but it's more of a large creek. The Colorado River is impressive in places, muddy and wild. These do not hold a candle to the green majesty of the Columbia. To put it in more domesticated, relateable terms, the Columbia is a *navigable* river, and even here at Boardman, some 250 miles from its notoriously hazardous mouth, there is the Port of Morrow. Ships call here. They can do this because the river is a water monster, a behemoth of proportions that are difficult for dryland people to comprehend without standing at its flanks. Mississippi, Missouri, Susquehanna, Delaware, Ohio, all these are rivers that this country has in a category with the Columbia. Laying down in my mediocre room that night, I thought about the next day, when this lovely waterway would be my companion for the rest of my trip to Portland, for much of the next year afterward, and fell fast asleep.

22. The sun wasn't up and fog had settled in over the valley as I rolled west. Breakfast was a simple affair of what I had left over from my road food. The destination was near and a big pancake breakfast was the last thing on my mind. I'd be arriving in Portland in under three hours' time. I queued up Opeth's *River* on the stereo, because, well, I made a promise to myself to do it, even though Opeth was almost certainly not writing about *this* river and I'm pretty sure they weren't even writing about a literal river at all. Just the same, the metaphorical waterway and the great song were the backdrop for the slowly illuminating sky and the unfolding sight of the huge wonder before me.

I wasn't quite within the Columbia River Gorge proper, but I was definitely in the river's valley, which is every bit as impressive as the nationally-protected Gorge itself. Numerous wind turbines line the hills on both sides of the river, taking advantage of the funnel created by the valley and the steady winds blowing through it. In addition to getting the wind to spin up some turbines, we use the force of the river to do it as well. The dams and locks that allow towboats to shove barges along

the course of the river also have power facilities in them, and rivers draining into the Columbia are also frequently dammed (Damned?) for power. It is a sore spot with many who depend upon the salmon using these waters, since no matter how well-designed are the fish ladders used by the creatures, dams interfere with their spawning cycle. Dams in general introduce a continuous interference with all kinds of natural cycles along waterways everywhere, with consternation being the other constant.

This is a *fascinating* part of the country, so very different from both where I grew up and where I now live. Not that it would make you less of a person to have missed the Columbia River or the red rocks of Utah, but if you're waffling about setting aside some money for a trip to see these things, commit to doing it before gas is eight dollars per gallon. Don't expect fireworks and multimedia extravaganzas, but do expect to be amazed at what has happened to the planet during its eons of existence. Skip the casinos and souvenir shops. Witness the power of water and wind and rock. Molten rock. Volcanoes.

I had never seen a volcano of any stripe, active, dormant, or extinct before I went northwest. These are not the oozing fascinations of Hawaii, which are nonetheless something I'd love to see. As I drove west, the morning sun roughly at my back, I crested one of the many small hills along the riverbank and saw the sharp, conical majesty of Mount Hood. According to Wikipedia, the mountain is 11,250 ft. high and is about 7,700 ft. higher than anything around it. The Cascade Mountains of which it is a part are rugged and beautiful, but there isn't a spine of 14,000-foot vertebrae like the one found in Colorado. Like Japan's Mt. Fuji, it really doesn't make a damn bit of difference that the peak isn't the largest or highest. It is a lovely landmark visible from just about every direction and there's really no mistaking it for anything else.

If you fired a laser beam from the Columbia River and hit Mt. Hood at its peak, the light would only need to travel about 30-35 miles due south at its closest point. But because of its prominence, I can see it now with very little difficulty and I'm still 100 miles away. You'd need to be blind to miss it on a clear day, which can admittedly be rare in these parts, from many points along the interstate.

Looking at a satellite picture of the region, you'll notice two things. First, there is an engraved line where the brown, rain-

shadowed leeward of the Cascade Range meets the deep, enchantingly rich green of the mountains themselves and everything west of them. Second, just about everywhere you see a white dot, you're looking at a volcano. Baker, Rainier, St. Helens, Adams, Hood. There are more. Not all are still active, but some should legitimately frighten you.

Mount St. Helens didn't always look the way it does today. Not that it's a hideous abomination now, but it was once a beautifully symmetrical landmark on par with Fuji and Hood. This region is apparently quite adept at building that classic volcano shape. Hawaiian mountains don't look like this. The aforementioned oozianness of the lava there tends to build a more blunt, sprawling land form. The molten rock of the Cascades is much more sticky and thick, tending to clot and clog, blocking itself up. Eventually the pressure builds behind these obstructions to a point where it simply can't be contained and the weakest spot on the mountain becomes the next caldera.

When Mt. St. Helens erupted in May of 1980, it blasted thousands of tons of rock from its top and a huge portion of its north slope, sending it sailing over the countryside and casting it skyward in a glorious plume of ash. Well, glorious unless you were underneath it when it fell. In the western hills of Portland there is a campus called the Oregon Health and Science University. It has an observation deck allowing you to look out over the Willamette Valley and on one of those rare clear days it's possible to take in a panoramic view. During our first move to Portland, we visited the OHSU deck and according to the informational plaque, learned that the explosion of St. Helens was loud enough that it could be heard in Montana. From where we were standing, looking at the mountain's decapitated profile from 60 miles away, there was silence. Due to the peculiarities of sound waves and their interactions with the surrounding land, an apocalyptic explosion went unheard by the City of Roses, and largely went without much effect there. Most of the ash went east with the winds, and although there was enough mud and debris discharged into the surrounding waters to temporarily make the Columbia too shallow to navigate, Portland was spared the worst of it. The mountain, and especially the northern areas around it were nearly instantly transformed into a bomb crater. Trees were laid down like rays of light emanating from the point of explosion. Where there once was verdant forest, nothing remained but rock and ash. It was an amazing example of instant

catastrophic change in a world where geologic history is usually made in million-year chunks.

Peering, godlike, into the crater from above (thank you Google Maps) I feel a mortal's fear. I've felt this same fear spying on Chernobyl: the many faces of Medusa, delivering figurative petrification. This is a silly reaction to have to a picture on a screen, but looking at ground zero for one of the most cataclysmic events in human history has an impact. I'm not sure if it's respect or pure irrationality making me nervous, but I feel it nonetheless. Chernobyl is still lethally radioactive. The mountain is still geologically active. Steam and smoke can still be seen rising from its bowels. Mt. Baker to the north is still active. Mt. Rainier, icon of Seattle, visible from Portland, is still active. Mt. Hood and Californian cousin Mt. Shasta both might still be active. Any one of these volcanoes could produce a bad day for millions of people. They all share the same explosive proclivities of St. Helens. On my drive out of Boardman, the sunrise illuminated a time bomb and I was still happy to see it.

WP

Rolling through The Dalles²⁷ I thought, like I always do, about the old computer game *The Oregon Trail*. Appropriate, since this highway roughly follows the path of the original Trail as well as part of the Lewis and Clark Trail. I didn't need to ford any rivers and haven't contracted cholera or dysentery, so my journey had been a good one by comparison.

Leaving The Dalles and the creosote smell of its railroad crosstie treatment facility, I drove onward. Through Hood River and its complement of wind surfers and sailboats, I was now almost due north of Mount Hood and the trees were beginning to get immense. Douglas Firs grow here like they own the place, which they kind of do. Enormous specimens one or two hundred feet tall, probably taller, stand straight and proud everywhere. Trees that would produce beams too big for any house, so an architect would start with the beam and build a home around *it*. Trees that welcomed me back to the Cascades and a green that British Islanders would recognize.

Cascade Locks. It rains something like 77 inches per year in this part of the country, where you'll learn the meaning of the words *temperate rain forest*. The name of the town refers to

27 It's pronounced *Dalz*, like *owls*. Or at least I think it is.

the boat-lifting structures that now lay submerged beneath Lake Bonneville,²⁸ or what I like to refer to as “this wider portion of a river that’s already huge, made larger by the construction of Bonneville Dam.”

Downstream of Cascade Locks is the Bridge of the Gods. Today it’s a big, beautiful bridge and one of the few that crosses the Gorge. The original Bridge of the Gods was created by a landslide large enough to obstruct the flow of the river, a sort of geological improv dam. Native American people were supposedly able to cross the river on foot using the landslide debris, and the name was born. The river eventually had enough of the impediment and washed it away, leaving a debris field on the riverbed that created the Cascade Rapids. Taking river traffic around the rapids inspired construction of the original Locks, and the whole mess is now submerged anyway. At least as long as the Bonneville Dam stands.

I reached the outskirts of Portland not long after passing the dam. The mile markers were counting down and putting mile zero under my tires meant I traversed the entire western segment of I-84. (The other segment is in the northeastern US.) Traffic was building. I unfolded my printed directions to find the leasing office and get the keys to my new digs. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t seen these places before, but this is the first time I’d actually owned a car while living in Portland, and driving is different than observing through the bus or train windows.

Portland’s Fremont Bridge carries I-405 across the Willamette River²⁹ toward the leasing office, and as the bridge has no walkways this was the first time I’d ever been across it. I wished I could take my time gawking out the windows at the city far below the immense span, but I had a job to do and other vehicles to avoid. Office found, keys obtained, I took my second trip back over the Fremont to Portland’s northeast side, my home for at least the next six months.

Parking was easy to find, but I did need to detach the trailer and muscle it into its own parking spot. A 135-pound man moving a 1200-pound trailer: leverage is a wonderful thing. I began to notice something I’d never really noticed before, somehow. The air smells like forest. It’s a lovely kind of cedar-

28 Not to be confused with prehistoric Lake Bonneville and its catastrophic flood, caused by the failure of a naturally-occurring dam.

29 It’s pronounced Wil-LAM-et. Not at all how I used to say it playing *Oregon Trail* in the school computer lab.

meets-compost-meets-woodsmoke sort of aroma of the sort you find in deodorant for men who want to smell woody. I opened my new place to discover it was relatively new, modern, and quite cold. Just as well, since the door was going to be propped open for the next hour or so. The unloading began in earnest, and it wasn't long before most of the floor was covered with a sprawl of things that would sparsely furnish my two bedroom apartment.

That done, I needed to get the empty trailer to the U-Haul place. Unhooking from it at the drop-off, I couldn't believe it worked so smoothly. Nothing was broken. Apart from the spinning wheels in Wyoming, no odd situations arose in the car's handling. A calculated gamble that ended up paying off. I parked back at the apartment and closed the door.

As the apartment slowly warmed, my jacket came off and for the first time on the journey I felt lonely. I'd been away from my family before, so it wasn't that precisely. This part of a move usually finds us all together in the home, diligently unpacking, boxes emptied and stacked, packing materials saved and stored. But nobody was there. Nothing was happening. There was only the hum of wall-mounted hair dryers and the traffic outside. For the entirety of the drive, I wasn't lonely at all. It was an adventure that I was happy to undertake. Staring at all my unpacking I just wished for some company.

23. My first time away from my family? No. My first Thanksgiving alone? Amazingly, yes. I'd started my new job and all was well there. I liked the people, liked the work. It was Thanksgiving break, my students and I off for a week or so. I used that time as I'd used most of my spare time, walking around the city. It was on a rain-showered Thanksgiving Day perambulation that this alone-on-Thanksgiving thought began to dawn on me. Violins did not start playing. I didn't start crying. I didn't call an escort service. I walked some more, enjoying the spurts of rain mixed with what northwesterners call "sun breaks", touring the quiet industrial areas, nearly empty river beaches, watching bald eagles fishing in the Willamette. Darkness. Dinner time. I walked home and I could see into living rooms. Dining rooms illuminated with the occasion. People were eating, talking, visiting. I felt blissfully liberated from the duties of relatives and family, simultaneously grateful for being able to see others in the act. I can't remember what I ate for dinner that

night, but I remember Skype-ing my wife during their dinner some 1200 miles away. Then I settled into bed, supremely happy with the world.

WP

My life as a temporary bachelor was punctuated by odd trips. I decided to take a day to go hiking on Hayden Island, a large strip of land situated to the south of the Columbia River's main navigation channel in the northern part of Portland. The part of the river flowing around the southern side of the island features North Portland Harbor and many small pleasure craft tied off at marinas.

Decades prior, the island was once the site of Jantzen Beach, an amusement park and popular swimming spot. It was turned into The Shops at Jantzen Beach, which is a fancy name for the collection of stores occupying the former home of the park. But beyond Home Depot and Target the island had been saved from the Port of Portland's development pressure and left relatively undisturbed as a wildlife refuge. Thousands of migratory birds use sheltered places like Hayden Island and nearby Smith and Bybee Lakes as resting places throughout the year. Parking the car in a somewhat questionable cul-de-sac near a railroad bridge, I hit the trail.

It was a typical winter day, cloudy with occasional sprinkles of rain. I dressed appropriately and brought a bit of food to stay out as long as I could and enjoy whatever was on offer. River beaches were part of the program and I set out walking, hoping to be able to reach the northwestern tip of the island.

Like the Willamette River beaches I explored, these were their own brand of lovely. Driftwood littered the shore and the quiet lapping of the water was only occasionally changed to a crashing slosh in the wake of passing ships. Entire trees, uprooted somewhere and carried by the river, sat upon the sand, slowly bleaching in the available sun.

Across the river was the Port of Vancouver, WA, where railcars sat by the hundreds to unload their wheat into moored ships. Other large bulkers and cargo vessels sat at anchor in the navigation channel, waiting for their turn. Barges were lashed together, afloat at the shore. On the island, blackberry thickets thwarted my attempts to probe into the woodlands at random and

forced me to use established paths. A clearing was occupied by an absolutely enormous electrical transmission tower that probably stood three or four hundred feet tall, carrying power cables over the ships and the Columbia. Walking up to the thing, I remember thinking that this sort of structure is usually fenced off with warning signs and barbed wire. Here, I stood directly beneath it and stared up at the fractal latticework of steel reaching up to dizzying height. The urge to climb bubbled up in me. I was unprepared to scramble up the steel support legs in the shoes I was wearing, but I tested part of the way. It was day and although I was wearing inconspicuous forest green and black, I would easily be spotted if someone at the Port would only just glance upward. I imagined returning with a hard hat and brightly colored reflective vest, which probably wouldn't raise any questions. It was so much easier to do this kind of thing as a younger, not-of-adult-age-in-the-eyes-of-the-law person, in a time when acts of mischief or trespassing involving public utilities weren't immediately construed as terrorism. It's so much harder to just fiddle around in an abandoned building or climb a power pylon these days.

Satisfied that I at least got to stand underneath the thing, I moved on down the beach. Reaching the tip of the island, I realized I'd made a geographical error in thinking that the Willamette would be visible where it emptied into the Columbia. That actually happens at nearby Kelley Point Park, not half a mile from Hayden's tip, and I'd make that trip not long after this one. I instead got a view of the Port of Portland and a large container ship being attended by equally large cranes. A vehicle terminal could also be seen, where thousands of cars sat waiting to be transported somewhere by truck, train, or vessel. Since the leaves were off most of the trees, large eagle's nests were visible in many of the treetops. The animals themselves were fishing the rivers, their bright white heads identifying them instantly.

I skipped the beach on the way back to Lumpy in order to get a closer look at the wooded expanse in the middle of the island. Black cottonwood grows prolifically in this part of town. There were some trails, although most of them seemed to be for maintenance vehicles instead of hikers and I got the sense that not many people decided to take walks on Hayden Island. I did pass two or three out with the dog, but that was it. One of them appeared to be camping or living on the island. The woods were definitely not of the old and mature variety, which makes sense

owing to their location in what is probably a mound of river silt that frequently floods. Wind is another challenge, and the night before coming for my walk the area was ravaged by one of the winter storms that brings some rain, but mostly funnels 60 and 70 mph winds up the Columbia River Valley. There were downed trees throughout the forest among a scattering of fallen limbs. From the look of things, it wouldn't take long for the decomposers to work on all this woody material. Mushrooms like it on Hayden.

I also planned a quick trip to the ocean in December of that year. I knew Sabrina probably wouldn't want to do much outdoorsy stuff in winter, but I really love the sea even if the weather isn't cooperating. The trip was accompanied by ample amounts of rain and fog. I drove to Seaside to take advantage of the fact that most people would be sharing my wife's thoughts about a walk on the beach on a cloudy, windy, and intermittently rainy day. I like the beach, but I *love* the beach when there aren't many other people there.

Stepping out of the car and donning my rain gear, I made my way through the rolling dunes and onto an expanse of sand that was mostly my own. A few other beach bums crossed my path, smiles and warm greetings from all of them. Something about coming out into the elements has a strange way of bonding people. Or at least sharing the misery. Seaside becomes a different place in summer, attracting throngs of city people willing to drive the 80 miles west. The two-lane highway becomes a solid line of cars, turning a peaceful drive to the shore into just another commute. Sand is covered with bodies. Perhaps this is the experience some people prefer, but I'll take the day in rain gear and spattered glasses.

Driving home, the rain had turned to snow in higher places and blanketed everything in a couple inches of sticky, picture-perfect precipitation. Though the going was a bit slow on the road it was a nice finish to a fun day out.

It would take another couple of months until my family would join me. In a way, Sabrina had the hard part of this move, being responsible for loading the truck and driving it here by herself. She and Macole mustered up a crew for the loading at least, but there was no help for the driving. Not that she needs any; it's a task she's happy to perform.

On the day she was set to arrive, I pedaled the eight miles home from work as fast as I could. By the time I rolled up,

panting a bit, she was already there unpacking the truck. Seeing her, I remember thinking her more beautiful than when I left, the thought of a man who has missed his wife. I left the bike on the sidewalk and two sweaty travelers were reunited after their months apart. I gave Macole a squeeze in between trips to her bedroom with boxes of goodies. The rest of the day was the unpacking party that I remembered and longed for back in November. Now it was January and the day was sunny, drops of rain here and there, temperature close to 50. It was a lovely winter day in Portland, the kind of day that drew us back there time and again.

The trailer hitch is still on the car, the hitch ball still in my toolbox. I haven't used it since.

24. It was business as usual in our place in Northeast Portland, just off of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. I say business as usual, but there were a few key differences. Most notably, I had a job. And what a difference *that* makes. For better or worse, now instead of spending most of my days walking around through a lovely city, with very little to keep me from doing whatever the hell I wanted to do, there was the daily routine, its own sort of comfort. It was a very typical Monday-through-Friday affair. I was exceptionally fortunate that I lived in Portland and worked in Vancouver, which was the opposite of the majority of commuters in that region, so while they sat in crawling traffic I was just merrily driving on the other side of the highway, counting my lucky stars. I was also able to ride my bike to work three-fifths of the time. At about eight or nine miles one way, the ride was longer than I'd ever done for a commute, much of it on bike paths and quiet streets which made for lovely interludes before and after punching the clock.

This move just felt different. Same city, totally different *part* of it. That accounted for some of the feeling. For me especially, having the work lent a more permanent air to everything we did. Once Sabrina found employment, we'd be well positioned to get into a house, completing our three-pronged plan.

I didn't know what to expect out of the teaching gig but it turned out to be pleasantly stimulating. There were some problem students that made me question my decision to be an instructor, a feeling that surely accompanies everyone who teaches anything. My supervisors gave me almost complete

autonomy and creative control when choosing how to deliver the material. I had a list of goals for the curriculum. How I met those goals was entirely up to me. I'd never been granted that sort of freedom at work and found it to my liking. I was teaching people something that I knew well, and I had the experience to help them figure out what railroading is and how (or *if*) they would fit into the picture as future employees. Most of them would be freight conductors just like I was, moving boxcars and riding the rails of North America.

It didn't take Sabrina too long to find positions at a legal consulting firm and fitness studio. She was using some of her copious certifications to good effect. She is very good at oversubscribing herself, but also one to see a variety of opportunities where I would only focus on one. Macole, as ever, soldiered on at school. She would be graduating right on time despite the wanderlust of her adult housemates. 2015 was off to a pretty good start by just about any measure.

We began touring homes in the spring. The lease would be up in May, so we had a decent amount of time to find and purchase a home without having to do too many acrobatic maneuvers with the property management people. We had seen some lovely places. We predictably found ourselves priced out of a majority of them. Matthew, our realtor, was much better than his predecessors at figuring out what made us tick, although it could also have been that we were better at letting him know what we wanted after befuddling our other real estate people. In general, the process was enjoyable. I had finally come to a place where I *wanted* to purchase a home and could actually see the possibilities of a place. For me, home searches in Denver were exercises in thinly veiled reluctance, my underlying sense that I didn't really want to buy a home there. I could see Sabrina's frustration with my hesitation then. In Portland she was getting the cooperation of a man eager to buy his first home. A common goal at last.

During this time we had watched the housing market *explode* in Denver. Home prices were going up. Fast. A variety of influences, from the legalization of recreational marijuana in Colorado³⁰ to the natural beauty of the place were combining forces to bring new residents in by the tens of thousands. By

30 Still, oddly enough, the most common preconception of a Coloradoan is that she is a pothead. I'm not sure if that's better or worse than a ski bum who knows every word to one John Denver song.

2015, there were already 600,000 more people in the Denver metro area than when I had first moved there in 2001.³¹ The entirety of Colorado's Front Range from Colorado Springs north to Ft. Collins was experiencing a similar phenomenon. Sabrina watched with horror as the home she'd struggled to sell not three years ago began to see unimaginable property value increases. A short wait would have lined her pockets with an amazing amount of cash, just as she had predicted it would when she bought it seven years prior. Regret doesn't even begin to describe it. One of the places we came closest to buying in 2014 had a 2015 value \$80,000 over the price that we both balked at as "not worth it." It was an astonishing repeat of the same sorts of conditions that preceded the crash of the housing market, and the US economy along with it, in 2008.

The market in Portland had already detonated a few years before we ever arrived, so the pricing was interesting, to say the least. It was very difficult to find small, two- and three-bedroom homes right around 1000 square feet for under \$350,000. The nice starter home of America's past now came with a prerequisite salary more in tune with an entrenched middle manager.

In an interesting twist, Portland was, at the time, one of the few places where you could actually find planned developments of smaller homes. There were a few areas where homes in the 500- to 800- square foot range were being built new, which was great to see. Great, except even a place one-third the size of typical new construction was being sold at about three-quarters the price. I know that it's not getting any cheaper to build homes, especially those with advanced energy-saving efficiency features, but I refuse to believe that these places weren't being marked up *considerably* more than could be accounted for by those features. The problem: we weren't looking for a small place because it was new and energy efficient. We wanted a smaller place so that it would be affordable. The strange dynamic of real estate seems to have more in common with the fashion industry than it does any business providing essential services to people.

31 Colorado State Demography Office. "Population Totals Colorado Substate." Colorado Demography. (accessed December 25, 2018).
<https://demography.dola.colorado.gov/population/population-totals-colorado-substate/#population-totals-for-colorado-and-sub-state-regions>.
File: PopRegionCountyEstimateYear2015.xls

Also affecting home values, bureaucracy. Portland has set up an urban growth boundary, within which it is possible to build more homes and develop. Outside the boundary the countryside is left to more agricultural, or at least less urban uses. Every opinion imaginable has been formed about this. Property owners within the boundary rejoice as their resale values skyrocket. Farmers outside the boundary who would like to sell or lease their land don't enjoy the same pricing as people across the invisible line. For us, the city provided a lovely mix of (mostly) well-planned urbanism with a side of farm. Hold the sprawl. The tab was just a bit pricey.

The way to navigate such a situation is by finding neighborhoods where the pricing hasn't yet kept pace with other, more elite sections of the town. We looked north. For our third time around, we'd been living in Northeast Portland and found it to be just as nice as Southeast in many ways. Looking up toward the northern parts of the city, closer to the ports and industrial areas was a way to lower asking prices. St. Johns. Kenton. Portsmouth. Overlook. Boise. The neighborhoods of North Portland were as varied in price and character as they were in name. The University Park neighborhood featured beautiful houses that were above our income tax bracket, owing to the proximity to the University of Portland and a great view of the Willamette Valley. Nearby Alberta had undergone a rapid transformation from quaint and lovely to hip, trendy, and unaffordable just since the first time we'd lived in town. The urban landscape of North Portland was changing quickly.

There were industries up north. For now. Trucks carrying intermodal freight to and from container ships thundered up and down its streets, passing the factories. While many areas of the city had a brightening collar, North Portland's was still a deep blue. Even this was changing. One of the criticisms of the growth boundary is that it had tended to push lower and middle income people out of the city to places like nearby Vancouver and the suburbs of Milwaukie, Tigard, and Oregon City to the south. Beaverton, Hillsboro, and Forest Grove sit west and Gresham sits east. The people who drive the trucks to the port can no longer feasibly afford to buy a home in the city. They are being replaced by educated people in young professions, by people whose combined household income stretches into six figures. People who can pay boutique prices for small homes without feeling completely hoodwinked. People who wouldn't be

caught dead spitting the dust from their mouths or wiping grease from their hands.

Even businesses themselves lament the growth boundary. Suppose a factory produces widgets. The widgets become popular. So popular are the widgets that the factory is running at full capacity and orders keep appearing. Backlog is endemic. The factory must expand. The adjacent properties which would make the most logistical sense are affected by the property values of the surrounding neighborhood, often making that expansion financially impossible, and that's if all the new, educated, six-figure neighbors don't shout down the purchase of said properties in city zoning meetings when they object to widget production in their back yards. The result? Widgets get made elsewhere. The factory closes, the town loses a business and builds luxury lofts in the old widget building. The illuminated sign above the leasing office reads, "Welcome to Widget" with a cartoony picture of a gear. They've left a gantry crane standing above the common area, partly because they're difficult to demolish and partly because it's industrial chic. Rentals start at \$3200 per month for a one-bedroom unit. In five years, the places will be sold as condominiums. Current residents will have first crack at the purchase. Pricing will start at \$450,000 for a 900 square foot loft. There will be a giant widget left behind by the retreating company, turned into a piece of industrial sculpture next to the community barbecue grill.

Just as common as the gripes are the songs praising the boundary. In cities like Phoenix, Dallas, Denver, and even many smaller towns, the people wanting to get out of the city for a piece of land are free to do so. They just need to go much further, since the city has stretched out into the surrounding countryside for tens of miles, blanketing the land with enormous subdivisions of cookie cutter homes that feature roadside billboards proclaiming *From the low \$500,000's!* The boundary cuts off such sprawl, forcing developers to be more deliberate about the use of space inside. Not that a home with a piece of land outside the line will come cheap, but at least it's *there* and there's no fear that an acre in the country this year will be a large lot surrounded by half-brick split levels with housing covenants next year.

With this in the background, Sabrina and I hunted for homes. Had our searches led us out into the countryside or the smaller towns outside of Portland proper, we might have found homes right around 1,000 square feet on a piece of land suitable

for growing lots of food and viewing some wildlife. Working against us was the tendency for country homes to be even larger than their urban counterparts, so that even if property values were a little lower it was more than made up for in additional cost accompanying that square footage. There is no free lunch. As it was, we were entranced with the idea of living *in Portland*. Our efforts did not extend beyond the growth boundary and we were at its mercy.

On one particular trip, we were seeing a brand new home built on a cul-de-sac in Portsmouth. A relatively recent, often maligned trend in Portland real estate was a sort of shotgun-meets-detached-townhome style. Portland homes historically had been fairly generous in size, placed on lots that were equally roomy. This type of construction doesn't lend itself to densely populated places, a consideration that didn't need to be made before, say, 1990. When one of the older houses needs serious renovations of the sort that cause developers to consider razing it, one of the options is to replace one home with two. This has been done many times in Portland, effectively doubling the housing density of an area, much to the chagrin of current residents and the delight of people like us, who just want an affordable house. Instead of simple twin homes or other duplexes, these slender, two-, three-, sometimes four-story structures are arranged side by side with varying amounts of space between them. I'd taken to calling them over-unders.

The home we'd chosen to tour in Portsmouth was one of two such dwellings built on what used to be a vacant lot. Not being a traditionally sized city lot there was a bit more elbow room and the homes weren't as narrow as some specimens of the species. They sat at the very end of the cul-de-sac, which could easily have been another intersection with Columbia Boulevard, upon which traffic rumbled noisily past. The traffic was about 20 feet from the house we toured, with very little to block the sight or sound save for a six-foot privacy fence. Inside, we were treated to a place that was quite nice. The finishes and layout were both pleasing. It was tasteful and modern, easy to picture ourselves in. Stepping out back revealed the postage stamp yard, probably 20 feet wide and half as deep. Taking up a good portion of that was a concrete pad for putting a grill or patio furniture on, presumably so a person could head outside and be swathed in traffic sounds. Peaceful outdoor eating would be rare.

The noise didn't seem too obtrusive from inside the

home. The good windows and insulation of a modern structure helped in that regard. After thinking about the orientation of the home both to the sun and the road, we started asking about the other structure that was being built next door. It was to the south and would get much better light all year long, very important in the gray Portland winters. Living in that place would also mean that the house we were touring would be a huge sound barrier for traffic noise. Our realtor said that he could approach the builder to ask if we could perhaps give some input into the construction of the home. It wouldn't be a custom-made home, but it was early enough in construction that we could select some finishes if the builder was game. It didn't take long to find out that the construction company would be happy to have a buyer before even finishing the home. (With new homes, their profits are often significantly affected by how long they need to hang onto a place after building it.) They had no problems building a few of the features to suit our tastes if we were able to make the purchase. That settled, in March of 2015 Sabrina and I put in our offer for the first place we would ever buy together.

25. In about two months, the builders would be finishing up a nice, 1,400 square foot home on Exeter Avenue. A home that had our names on it. A home that had *my* name on it. Sabrina had been in this game before, but this was a brand new experience for me. We were all excited.

Honesty dictates that I address the size of the home. It was large. I just spent a bit of ink railing about the size of homes when I did in fact buy one that was, truth be told, more expansive than I really wanted. Explanations are in order.

The US Census Bureau keeps track of things like this³² and I want to point out some interesting figures. In the US in 2016:

- 738,000 single-family homes were completed.
- 686,000 of those had air conditioning.
- 71,000 were built with two bedrooms or less while 336,000 had *four* bedrooms *or more*.
- The median size of this group was 2,422 square feet.

32 United States Census Bureau. "Characteristics of New Housing." Census.gov. <https://www.census.gov/construction/chars/highlights.html> (accessed June 22, 2017). I was unable to find 2015 data, but the 2016 market shouldn't have been appreciably different.

- Of the 116,000 contractor-built homes, the median contract price was \$280,300.

Let's compare. Our Exeter house had no air conditioning apart from a couple of ceiling fans. It's really quite unnecessary in Portland despite the occasional hot days. I can blame Sabrina and her heat-loving nature for this, though I'd rather be a little warm and use a fan than pay to run and maintain an air conditioner. The tree-hugger in me was pleased. Our home had three bedrooms, two full bathrooms, and one half bathroom. This put us in the gray area between the very small number of two bedroom places built (Places we would have liked to see...) and the majority of places that were larger. The bathroom numbers for 2016 are similar, with most homes having between one and a half and three bathrooms.

Square footage, the number that caused me some consternation, stood at about 1,417 for our over-under. This put us a full 1,000 square feet, or the size of one comfortable house *under* the median for all single family homes built in 2016. When I call our house "large", I'm not being facetious to emphasize how counter-cultural I am. 1,417 square feet is a genuinely large house. It *feels* like a big place. The three bedrooms upstairs were generously sized, with a master bedroom that had an en suite bathroom and a high, vaulted ceiling. If the walk-in closet was included with the bath, that whole area wasn't much smaller than the first Denver apartment I moved into back in 2001. There was an amazing kitchen, great for cooking. The living area was large and featured a gas fireplace. I wouldn't want to clean anything much bigger than what we had.

During our home search, Sabrina had inexplicably begun searching for three bedroom houses. It took some prying to find out why: we were expecting two of Macole's friends to come stay with us for an indefinite period of time. I was the last to know. It ended up working out, since homes of that size were more plentiful and coincidentally located in many of the neighborhoods we had targeted. We also didn't really expect to buy a brand new home but it was the one that fit best. Compared to the \$280,000 price tag of the median contractor-built home, we were slightly lower than that, which was far more than I wanted to spend. Work was going well and we had the means to cover it so it wasn't a huge issue, but considering that the Hooker house had cost about \$100,000 less back in 2008, it seemed like

an extravagance.

There were some compromises made, to be sure. The location of the home, near Columbia Boulevard, wasn't my first choice. I began getting concerned when we would take trips to go visit the house and see the construction progress. We'd see all the trucks thundering past, the cars zipping along, and I hoped it wouldn't be all day, all the time. I figured there would be daily rhythms to the traffic and not simply an omnipresent wall of sound. That was a gamble we took. The size of the backyard was also a compromise, but I could flex my green thumbs to make it work. The size of the place would be made up for in rental payments that we expected to collect from our roommates when they arrived. All in all, it seemed to be the right place at the right time. We would soon be able to complete our list of goals for Portland.

In the meantime, we visited our future home, peering in the windows to see what was being done. "Oh, look! The countertops are in!" This at the sight of the gray quartz we picked as our working and eating surface. "It's green now!" Exclaimed as we pulled up one day after they'd painted the exterior in the sage-y green with wheat-y colored trim. Floors went down. Finishes applied. Appliances were seen. It was exciting to see it come together and know that we'd soon be on the other side of the glass.

It was a Friday and the girls had already begun transporting stuff from the apartment when I left work that afternoon. Instead of my usual ride to the MLK place, I rode my bike home to a brand new house and slipped into the garage. What an exciting time. No matter how many homes a person owns or what shape they're in, I imagine this excitement is fairly universal when a human meets a house. Protection from the weather, a place to hide, to sleep, to be naked. A place where the walls are the colors you want them to be. A package in which all of your worldly possessions are wrapped and protected. It's just a very mammalian feeling, and on that day I felt it more than I ever had.

It was an easy move, just a couple of miles. We rented a small truck and barely packed anything. Our clothes mostly just stayed on their hangers and were tucked into the plastic bins, quickly opened, untucked, and re-hung not long after. We could be sloppy. Things normally packed carefully, surrounded by

bubble wrap and newsprint were casually set into boxes, sometimes not even in boxes, and hustled to Exeter Avenue. It felt more like an evacuation.

It didn't take but a couple of hours and it was done. By that evening our apartment was empty and our home wasn't even close to full with all of our stuff. Our reassembled bed sat in regal splendor under the vaulted heights of the ceiling above, the bedroom window overlooking what little there was of our yard and a massive red cedar tree in one of our neighbor's. The en suite bathroom had a little window in it, one of my favorite features, and at its second-story height it opened into the canopy of a maple tree. Not only was it possible to shower with a window open, letting a fresh breeze season one's bathing, but the light that came through the window was tinted green by all those maple leaves, lending the place a very unique feeling. On warm summer days it was like showering in the garden.

Macole had chosen the bedroom that faces the front of the house, it being the larger of the remaining two. She even had her own bathroom, larger than ours but without the window. The third bedroom sat between the others, eventually to be filled by one of our roommates.

Our first night in the house felt odd in the way that first nights tend to do. New background sounds and surroundings were a little disorienting. The home itself made different noises when someone used the stairs or needed to visit the kitchen. Then there was the road. I really don't remember being bothered by the sound of it on those first nights in our new home. It could be heard inside, but not as loudly as the home we toured. That part was according to plan. Something unexpected was the way the home would very subtly shake when a particularly heavy truck would roll past, just enough to be felt. We hadn't noticed that during our tours of the area. The nearby rail lines had their own noises and vibrations, but for as much railroad activity as was present, it was an easy sound for all of us to tune out. Something about the motion of a train and its sound doesn't seem to raise my hackles. In all honesty, for a guy who finds trains interesting it was a really fun place to be. In the spirit of full disclosure, the trains had nothing to do with our decision to purchase the home, though I'm almost certain they had a role in discounting the price.

In the category of things I'd never had before was the attached garage. Our small car fit snugly into the space with

some room to spare. It was very handy to have a place to change the oil out of the weather and to be able to crank up my guitar amp without giving the rest of the family too much of an earache. I had dreams of a small workbench with some good tools to do the things that are impossible with just a simple toolbox. Every once in awhile, a person just needs a bench with a vise on it.

We started improving the landscaping almost immediately, adding and removing plants to be more to our liking. The construction company had inexplicably planted a non-fruit-bearing fruit tree in the already cramped (and shaded, I might add) backyard. That was uprooted before it had a chance to get established to make room for things that actually produce food. It was already late May, so we bought a few pepper and tomato plants just to have something in the ground and see what we could produce. The front saw calla lilies heavily represented, a Sabrina favorite. I took to watering the new elm tree out on our tree lawn, which was a sensible choice in a sensible spot and would probably be a nice show in autumn.

There were minor maintenance issues to address with the builder as with any brand new structure. I spent some uncomfortable hours in the crawlspace of the home doing some cleanup work that the contractors should have been responsible for. On one day, I checked out a small ladder from the local tool library³³ and spent a good long while trying to figure out how to Super Mario my way up to the second-story roof. Using some techniques that would have given any OSHA inspector an embolism (coupled with my own natural abilities as a monkey) I made my way to the top and spent some time sitting on the roof in my overalls. The neighbors might have been concerned. I used the opportunity to clean out the gutters and remove some overhanging branches while being slightly afraid of falling to a paralyzing stop in the side yard. It was a good day.

We had no shortage of good days in the new house. Our roommates eventually arrived, filling in the remaining space. Macole was pleased to have friends in the house. We began to domesticate, finding accessories and hanging things like blinds and curtains for the downstairs windows. Small purchases of furniture helped to fill out the home and turn it into a place to be comfortable, to have guests. We found a five-gallon bucket of

33 Tool libraries. A thing in Portland. I *do* love the town.

oops paint and transformed the inside of the garage from joint-compound chic to cozy man cave. It was a utilitarian space but that didn't mean it needed to be ugly.

I enjoyed a shorter ride to work that was almost entirely on bike paths and featured a nice long stretch of trail right beside the Columbia. I watched the boats drifting by and osprey fishing alongside eagles in the green water. I could stop to pick ripe blackberries in the summer. When I got home I just rolled the bike into the garage instead of trying to shoehorn it into a space with dozens of unused bikes forgotten by other apartment dwellers. It felt like unreasonable luxury. Sabrina had a bus pass for the two days per week that I drove to work, and while the ride to her work downtown wasn't the shortest, it was still better than the drive.

It was a lovely entry into the homeowners' world for me. I finally had a visceral understanding of why people enjoy homes so much, why they sacrifice so much of their time and money to have and keep them. Sabrina had always given me a long leash with the Hooker house, letting me fix things, break things, and treat the home as if it were my own, but it never was. The Exeter house had *my* name right there next to hers on the deed. Like most everything else we'd done, this was a team sport. We weren't always chalking up wins but we were still playing together.

I remember that summer being one of comfort and normalcy. There was a sense that the house on Exeter Avenue might be the last place I ever lived. I began to know it intimately, all the places water built up in the yard, which steps made creaking sounds, the places dust built up at an alarming rate. We took walks in the neighborhood, exploring the place in which we were planted. The lovely St. Johns bridge, a Great Depression-era structure with strong Gothic lines and a distinctive green patina was nearby. We walked over the bridge on a relatively clear July day.

Not long before, some climbers from Greenpeace had suspended themselves from the span, cabling each other together in protest. The reason was the planned transit of a large oil drilling rig from one of the shipyards in Portland down the Willamette. Shell Oil had slotted the rig for exploration of Arctic waters. So there they hung, all tethered together with supplies to last for days, in protest of a major oil company's activities. Kayaks were all over the river, body blocking the vessel from

making it past the bridge. They were eventually peacefully removed, but some ribbons and other remnants of their stand were visible on the bridge as we crossed it.

Also visible were those lovely Cascade volcanoes. Mt. St. Helens a bit to our north. Mt. Adams looming just behind her. Mt. Hood to the east. Far to the north, it was clear enough to see Seattle's landmark Mt. Rainier. The Willamette slid toward the Columbia far below us. I could have stayed up there for hours, but Sabrina isn't as thrilled by high bridges that shudder ever so slightly when heavy trucks roll by.

Another charming part of our neighborhood, likely responsible for the affordable price of our home was that we were two blocks from an enormous sewage treatment plant. I realize that upon reading this, anyone with experience will begin the instinctive nose-wrinkling of the sort that accompanies the stench of feces. I will reassure everyone that this facility did have an odor, only infrequently detectable from the house, that was more akin to fermenting grass clippings or salad greens that are about a day from going rancid. It wasn't an entirely unpleasant smell. There were large compost piles in the facility that I would ride by on my way to work. They added the sweet bouquet of decomposition as they steamed in the cool morning air. Most of the lagoons at this facility were actually covered, and the rotten gas was collected and piped to at least one nearby business to be burned as fuel. There was a large, high pressure gas line visible just outside the front gate of the facility, the wooshing sound a powerful reminder just how much poop gas a city can make.

We even managed to get to know our neighbors. One was a woman named Katherine who had been injured by a careless driver and used her time at home to do all sorts of craft work. She had a small chicken coop in the backyard, the occupants of which could be heard chattering from our open bathroom window. We were gifted a few dozen eggs and some of her surplus produce from time to time. We repaid her in help with some of her chores and a big bag of chicken feed. Valentino was the man across the street with a couple of kids, whose wife we never met, but who lent me a properly-sized ladder to access my roof whenever I needed it. Ruben lived with a woman of indeterminate relationship (She was much less keen on talking to the neighbors, but was never rude.) in the sound barrier house we'd toured. He trained dogs from home. On paper, I can't

imagine a less desirable occupation for a neighbor to have. It was a small business, and while he had three or four dogs over there at any given time I can't remember any of them ever being a nuisance. Whatever he did to train them was working. He would frequently be seen in the cul-de-sac with one of his students, walking around and teaching them how to heel, walk on the correct side of their owners, and just not be jackasses. It was a diverse group of people, none of them irritating, all of them easy to get along with. Sabrina would remark that we'd won the neighbor lottery, especially when cracking open some of the offerings from Katherine's flock.

That was life on Exeter Avenue for awhile. Our jobs weren't perfect (Are there such things?) but we were making it happen. Sabrina had taken a position with a fitness studio of fairly high repute. It was a Los Angeles-based franchise with only a few locations and she was picked as part of the team to open the new Portland studio. It was an exciting opportunity. It was also run by a pair of megalomaniacal women who were far more concerned about the amount of makeup on my wife's face than the quality of her teaching. The studio had been built at considerable expense in the well-to-do Pearl District of downtown Portland. They were expecting a big turnout but refused to take suggestions from people familiar with the culture of the place. A somewhat funny example came down to something so pedestrian as drinking water.

One of the things you'd expect to be in ample supply at a place that advertises "SWEAT" in large letters on the front of the establishment is water. Lots of it. Free for the drinking. Any fitness-based establishment had better have access to water. If a fitness business is in Portland, Oregon, home of green people who hug trees, recycle, compost, put the word "sustainable" in front of everything, and hang from bridges to protest oil exploitation, the water contained in said business had better come in some form other than the *only* form in which this studio was providing it: single-use plastic water bottles. Disposable bottles to be purchased from the counter, complete with the company logo on them.

Significant amounts of breath were expended trying to explain to the boss women that this was a really bad idea, and also that they would need a recycling bin especially if this was their sole source of studio water. No sale. Not even a damned water fountain for the people who came and sweated their asses

off in the spinning³⁴ studio and followed that up with a yoga class, the studio's signature combination of fitness activities. A recycling bin was eventually allowed, even though the contents were just dumped in the trash with everything else. A water fountain never did materialize. Meredith, Sabrina's multitasking supervisor, picked up the habit of sending text messages embedded with images of water fountains and water bottle filling stations in various locations throughout the city. Meredith had worked for these women before in Los Angeles (inexplicably choosing to do so again), in addition to being a fierce roller derby competitor and former flutist with the Seattle Symphony. Other of Sabrina's coworkers were just as unique. The business, though, continued to stagnate largely due to the owners' inability to bend themselves to the unique Portland market.³⁵ The trainers at the studio were being paid by the head, so everyone was feeling the burn. Empty classes meant empty wallets. That their suggestions to improve the business fell on deaf ears was a slap in the face.

Even more nonsensical was the decision to open the studio *right next to another fitness studio*. In a town in love with bikes, there were now two side-by-side spinning studios. The city is so bike friendly, so populated with people who love to ride their bikes that one wonders why in the world anyone would decide to go spinning. No matter the weather, I've always seen plenty of people out on the roads doing something useful with their time on the pedals rather than sitting in front of mirrors while someone shouts encouragement at them. Massage parlor with therapists who know how to work out hamstrings knots? Good idea. Bicycle mimicry-turned-exercise regimen in a town that isn't afraid to use actual bikes? Questionable.

At home, there were two growing problems. The first was that our two new roommates were failing to pay any rent at all. We had come to a verbal agreement³⁶ that this would be done, even stipulating fair amounts for each to pay. They were both employed by this time and Sabrina and I just kind of hinted

34 Fancy marketing term for riding a stationary bike for the purposes of exercise. Although, really, why else would someone ride one of them?

35 It would eventually be to their detriment: the studio closed in April 2017.

36 I realize, typing this, that it's the second time we've made this mistake. Not that having a written lease would have caused us to go to court over something like this, but it might have changed the tone of the conversation, as it were.

at their responsibility to throw us some money. Mostly we just ended up looking at each other and shrugging. We didn't need the money to make ends meet so it was more rude than crippling.

The second problem was more insidious. The constant drone of Columbia Boulevard was having an effect. There were only a few quiet hours of the day, typically between midnight and four in the morning, when the traffic died down and most of the trucks vanished. The rest of the time brought the sounds and seismic activity. Opening the bedroom window on a hot summer night was difficult. 30-ton trailers would bounce over the same potholes, startling me from sleep with grating regularity. Closing the windows worked a little and I suppose normal people would have just bought an air conditioner to both cool it off and drown the noise. We are not normal people. But that sound...the incessant friction of rubber on pavement, the motors revving and enormous cooling fans slicing the air ahead of massive diesel engines...these things were diet torture. Not quite bad enough that it warped a person, but so unpleasant that life just began to have its base amount of background irritation increased. We'd originally thought that the sound would just become part of the unnoticed backdrop of city living, something barely recognized and oddly similar to the sound of ocean waves. A river of commerce. It sadly did not work that way for either of us.

26. *I'm not happy.*

Three words that wrap their hands around your throat as soon as they escape the lips of your spouse, your partner, anyone you care about. When Sabrina said them to me in the living room of our Exeter Avenue home, I confess that I wasn't surprised. I'm remarkably ignorant about some things but I had become attuned to the moods of my lady and there were signs that she was feeling uneasy.

The pressures of her two jobs, the isolation of a new town (even if it's for the third time), dealing with my gripes about students, the debacle of our roommates, all of it underlain and elevated by the constant sound of trucks supplying the transportation services needed to keep the Port of Portland operating and their steel-wheeled compadres, air horns wailing and engines throbbing.

On the third attempt we had succeeded. Our flag was planted in the rich soil of the Pacific Northwest, we'd found

employment and even put ourselves in a home. It just wasn't *right*. Sabrina gave voice to the growing unease we were feeling about the place in general, that we had rushed into the wrong house, that maybe this town that had been so good on paper might not be where we ought to be living.

So we talked it over. We identified the problem and came up with ideas for how to solve it. We avoided blaming each other and figured out how to commiserate without accusation. That is *way* tougher than it sounds. When you feel like you've moved heaven and earth to make something happen, made yourself vulnerable, taken risks...the last thing you want to start thinking is that you've been running for the wrong goal. You really don't want to realize that the self-talk required to keep up morale and see your ideas through has been a deception.

My belief had always been that Portland was *the* town, we just hadn't been approaching the relocation with the proper strategy for staying. Each of the three moves was different enough that they should have had different results. With the third move, we did most everything right. Apart from the road-adjacent location of our Exeter house, we had taken up a tenable position.

It just wasn't the right place. It would never be the right place. What a heartbreaking thing to realize as true. What a testament to our stubbornness and determination that it took three attempts to understand. Henry, my mentor and coworker, had been mystified by our comings and goings, all the while remaining comfortable in his nice suburban home in Littleton, Colorado. A lifetime's worth of railroad work had secured for him a stable base to support his family, his golden years guaranteed by the Railroad Retirement Board. Upon hearing of another of our moves, Henry would smirk a bit and ask, "When are you coming back?" Not in the disappointed father sort of way, but in the playful manner of a person who can recognize that you *will* come back. You cannot help yourself.

That was true. We had been tossing our boomerang from somewhere in the Centennial State and it would always return. There was a reason I'd stayed in Colorado for so many years after my 1998 arrival. Sabrina especially seemed to have an inescapable connection. We also had plenty of good reasons for wanting to leave, though many of them were mine. Somewhere in this process, I distinctly remember realizing that this was a burden of maturity. This sort of questioning and analytical

decision making, of trying to choose between options that are either equally good or indistinguishable. At some point, the adult must make choices and stick with them or be saddled with indecision and rootlessness forever. I make the latter sound as if it were a curse, and I don't mean that.

I do, however, recognize that while our means may have been adult, our decision making process was not quite as mature. We set up unrealistic expectations and then fell apart a little bit when those weren't met. Our idealism was clouding our judgment. All of these moves had been more like extended vacations, after which we returned home to Colorado to rest, regroup, and plan the next trip. Henry saw that pretty clearly. I had always thought that I'd find another place to live and want to stay, hoping it would be a place both Sabrina and I could agree on.

There had to be something driving our wanderlust. Why in the world were we so hell-bent on leaving Denver? Colorado had always held a special place in our hearts, but Denver was a city experiencing tremendous growth and rapid transformation. The traffic and housing prices were becoming a problem. A driver of our third move was the fact that Denver had become just as pricey to live in as Portland. In 2014, there was no longer any real financial reason to stay in the Mile High City, which had been our last solid reason for staying. There had also been a sort of brooding dissatisfaction with Denver, a sense that we were growing apart.

After putting the Exeter house up for sale, I accompanied Sabrina as she attended a weekend training in Bellingham, Washington that made me think perhaps it was the *size* of both Denver and Portland that weren't in harmony with my desires. It was September of 2015 with just a touch of fall in the air. Sabrina's training took place at Western Washington University. Clinging to the side of a tree-covered slope overlooking Bellingham Bay, the campus was lovely. After dropping her off on the first morning, I had most of the day to explore. My only task was to scare up some lunch and meet my lady back at the school to eat it.

Bellingham has right around 90,000 people. The beauty and old world grandeur of the University reminded me of Hogwarts, shrouded in fog, completely surrounded by hundreds of thousands of needle-leaved trees. Founded in the late 19th century, WWU is neither that old nor in any real way reminiscent

of anything in the Harry Potter universe, perhaps excepting some of the stonework on the lovely school buildings. There are fairly modern structures there and the only real magic taught involves quite a bit of mathematics, though the feeling of the place reminded me of a fictional universe. There's a statue of a man apparently having sex with a bear. I found myself pining to be attending school there, with no job to worry about or bills to pay. What a fantastic setting in which to learn new things. Deer wandered the grounds. I had never seen black squirrels until I went to Bellingham.

Wandering the walking trails laced through the hills of the campus was a lovely way to spend the time while the fog burned away. A large lookout tower, carved with countless student initials and likely the site of many sanctioned and unsanctioned academic rituals, sat near the top of one fold in the forest. The climbing of said tower revealed a partial view of the campus and of Bellingham Bay. I was technically in the Sehome Hill Arboretum, wonderfully placed in the students' backyard. My walk took me through a small tunnel and I strained my neck as I tried to see what was making all the bird noises far above me.³⁷

The morning thus spent, I attended to my spousal duty of locating food. There was a co-op not far from our hotel on Bakerview Road, named for the sight of a ubiquitous feature of many Pacific Northwest towns: a Cascade Range volcano. Mount Baker is nearly 11,000 feet tall and at its latitude is nearly always covered in snow. In the past, so much snow has fallen on the mountain that Mount Baker Ski Area set a world record. During the 1998-1999 snow season, an impossible 95 feet of snow fell on the slopes.³⁸ When the clouds are low or the fog is thick, Baker hides. At any other time it's impossible to hide the massive thing, being only 30 miles or so east of the town. It is also classified as an active volcano, and the rapid melting of all that snow which would be very likely during an eruption has caused the town of Bellingham to look warily at its rocky neighbor.³⁹ Cities have been known to become entombed under

37 Birds, I suspect.

38 Dolce, Chris. "5 Incredible Snowfall Extremes." The Weather Channel. <https://weather.com/safety/winter/news/five-snowfall-extremes-20130103#/1> (accessed January 5, 2019).

39 Scott, Kevin M., Wes Hildreth, and Cynthia A. Gardner. "Mount Baker – Living with an Active Volcano." USGS.gov.

rock and mud thus formed. In 1985, the town of Armero in Colombia was almost entirely buried beneath one of these *lahars*, as they are known. Nevado del Ruiz was the volcano, situated at similar distance from Armero as Baker is from Bellingham. At least 20,000 people were killed. Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines is famous for creating mudslides. Even Mt. St. Helens created gigantic lahars, sluicing down river valleys all the way to the Columbia River. Had there been a town in the way, it would have disappeared. Such is life in the shadow of an active volcano: beautiful and slightly threatening, a very attractive combination.

Turning into the parking lot of the co-op, I could see Mt. Baker in the distance. The drivers in Bellingham were courteous and unhurried, in stark contrast to the folks of Seattle and Portland. People in the small town drove the speed limit and used their turn signals, for the most part. The stodgy old fart in me was happy with that. Supplies acquired, I returned to the university for some more exploration and my lunch with Sabrina, where I told her about my adventures in this fun little town. After lunch, I wandered until she was finished with training, and then we went out for some delicious fish and chips at a place downtown. On the way, we stopped at an overlook on the campus which provided a northward view toward Ferndale, Blaine, and not 30 miles away, Canada. This explained the large number of British Columbia license plates on the roads and fueled our desire to visit, a yearning that wouldn't be satisfied for some time.

The next day was approximately the same except for a visit to the marina on the bay, where I walked out on the piers to see dozens of boats, tied off and bobbing lazily. A memorial to fishermen of Bellingham sat nearby. This was very much a town steeped with maritime culture and history. Not many large vessels called at Bellingham, using the better-equipped ports at Vancouver, Everett, and Seattle instead on their commercial voyages. There was evidence that perhaps the town once had been a more important shipping center, with the infrastructure still intact at bayside and one large ship tied up at a nearby pier, looking like it may have been, and may yet be there awhile.

Before driving home, we explored the town a little more, visiting a farmer's market and some of the neighborhoods. We

drove to see some of the million-dollar homes on Bellingham Bay. We saw the more affordable neighborhoods that make up most of the rest of the city. Sabrina was reminded of Grand Junction, Colorado, where she spent much of her childhood. I immediately fell in love with the town and Bellingham was penciled onto the list of places we might move once the house was sold.

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September was a month of some decisions. Our home wasn't generating a flood of offers. We needed to be patient, which, as can be imagined, was not our forte.

The searching and planning began, and research was done to determine which place would count our little party of three among its population, welcome us to its restaurants, its grocery stores. Which town would issue three more library cards. It's conceivable that we could forever bounce from city to city, looking for that Goldilocks settlement and never finding it. We'd just keep searching the web for whatever quality it was we wished to find, and upon finding it we could move only to discover the idiocy of our cherry-picking. *Da capo!* An endless cycle of wandering. A cynical review of this book. These sobering thoughts entered into my mind with increasing frequency as we pored over the data for our three choices.

Grand Junction was probably top on Sabrina's list, but I feared it would have the taste of an odd hometown reunion. I don't hate the small town in which I grew up, although the thought of moving back to Hokendaqua, Pennsylvania doesn't fill me with joy. The job market in Grand Junction at the time was also such that I had no idea what I would do for money. The desert climate was also a concern for me even if my cactus flower of a wife would be blooming. Under 10 inches of rain per year falls in that part of the world and summer temperatures routinely break the century mark. Denver was plenty hot and dry for me to be getting on with.

Bellingham had a similar job market to Grand Junction with just a touch more of the blue-collar work that I could expect to qualify for and real estate pricing was about half again as high, for some reason. A lovely small town which really spoke to me when we visited, but unless I was a professor at Western Washington University or perhaps a state/county employee, there

wasn't enough money to go around to afford a home. I'm perpetually puzzled by places like this, where the types of work available and the incomes they provide are in no way representative of the resources required to become a homeowner there. My heart wanted this to be our place.

Denver's housing market was still ridiculously overpriced and getting less affordable almost by the month. If you stared at listings for rentals long enough, you could watch the prices tick up from *Ouch* to *You're actually joking now*. It's just that there was *work* there. Jobs for me to do. Jobs for Sabrina and Macole to do. The pay was decent enough that we'd be able to afford the stupid rents and still come out ahead. I applied for a position as a light rail operator with RTD. A few other jobs that piqued my interest got applications. Sabrina put out feelers to return to her work with the City of Denver. Of the options, this was regrettably coming out ahead of the others.

Then we waited. Neither of us wanted to undertake a move without first securing employment. We also didn't want to do the asynchronous move again, one of us going ahead of the other. Moving is hard enough as a team. September passed into October and we still weren't seeing any action with the house. We were facing the prospect of being stuck in the Exeter house by seasonal variations in the housing market. We worked with the realtor, tweaking the price here and there, putting up with the phone messages that told us we had 30 minutes to get out of the house so someone could tour it. We had lost one of our roommates by this time, fortunately the messy one, so the rest of us simply needed to mind our surroundings enough that prospective buyers saw a clean home.

The rains came in October as they tend to do, Halloween not far behind. We had a chance to enjoy the decorations and general holiday spirit of our neighborhood, Sabrina often shrieking with delight as we drove past a particularly festive home or yard. Our own home had a good start on a collection of decorations. Sabrina used newspaper, duct tape, black garbage bags, and some rope to make a dead body. Or, at least what appeared to be a dead body wrapped in black plastic, bound at the neck and feet, suspended upside-down from our front porch. Our neighbor Valentino came over with his kids for trick-or-treat night and while the two boys thought the body was amazing, the little girl was too afraid to approach the house, presumably because the body bag was just about the same size as she was.

Job done.

November arrived with an interview invitation for me. I needed to fly to Denver for it, which didn't tickle me. Arriving at the Denver airport, I found that in typical rental-car-company fashion, the compact car I had reserved had magically transformed into an "upgraded" car, or in this case, the largest minivan ever conceived by a Japanese motor company. I took my monster Toyota to my sister-in-law Nicole's house, who had a condo in Capitol Hill and graciously allowed me to spend the night there so I wouldn't need to pay for a hotel. Arriving after she was abed and leaving before she arose, I left a little thank you note and made for my interview. It went well and they offered me the job shortly thereafter. I filled out paperwork, completed my physical, and took my Mom Van back to the airport to fly home.

Arriving at the Exeter house, the weather was much warmer and wetter, two of the virtues of life in Portland that I was loathe to give up. A second interview opportunity came a couple days later via Skype. No need to fly to Denver for that one, although I probably would have grudgingly done so. Not long after the conference came another job offer, dutifully accepted by me. Like a cheating spouse, I had two offers on the table, neither aware of the other. I did have start dates in my pocket, so our move would have a timeline. Sabrina and I worked out how we would be able to make this happen, and right around the same time we received an offer to buy the house, which we gladly accepted. It was all very serendipitous, but still left the question of what she would be doing for work when we arrived. My pay would be enough to carry us and she had some leads, providing some light at the end of the tunnel.

With the home spoken for, it was all over but the packing. And the moving. And the fretting. All the usual cast were present for the show. We'd be sending Macole ahead of us to go stay with her grandmother Cathy, who was happy to be able to get some granddaughter time while we were practicing our convoy skills.

I confess that it was terribly easy to pack up the home. It was much harder to tell our neighbors that we were leaving. Katherine gave us some knitted winter hats as going away gifts, still in the crafting phase of her recovery. The other two neighbors just got the story of how we came to move in and move out in such a short period of time, a tale we've told to

many people over the years. Without having them read this book from cover to cover, I feel like I cheat them out of a neighbor and the whole story at the same time. It might be easier to just tell people, “Look, we’re very odd. We decide on things and then undecide them. We occasionally make hasty and foolish decisions. I occasionally overindulge my wife’s whims and she reciprocates by acquiescing to my idiocy as well. While most people usually save this sort of behavior for small consumer goods or vacation destinations, we do it with the places we live. For some reason. I’m sorry.” A much less cynical review of this book.

27. I had loved that house. Leaving it so soon tugged at me a bit. It bothered me very little that we would be moving out of earshot of Columbia Boulevard and its parade of vehicles.

There was a garage full of the contents of the house, ready to go. We had sold one or two things before leaving, among them our washer and dryer. We easily found a buyer who came over and we not-so-easily devised a way to get the appliances down the stairs and out the door. Pro tip: you can use a plastic under-washer pan as a sled and then put two bodies downslope of it to hold it back as you pray not to lose your footing and be crushed by a 500-pound piece of machinery on a toboggan.

Macole had taken a large suitcase with her the week before on her journey to grandma’s. Everything else was coming with us. Sabrina and I performed our well-rehearsed routine and once the garage was mostly cleared out, she gave the house a going-over to make sure our buyers had a spotless place to call home. I worked on my spatial-arrangement skills in the truck’s cargo bay. Before too long, the garage sat empty, its colored walls buttressed by neatly stacked paint cans. *Interior Walls. Exterior Trim. Garage. Interior Trim.* There was a box of spare hardware, door knobs, hinges, and drawer pulls left by the builder. Some odd pieces of cabinet wood and flooring joined some ceramic tiles in a corner. There were four metal numbers, remnant of a quick little project to change the font of the numerals identifying our address. These things might one day help to complete the occasional DIY job for someone, but it wouldn’t be us.

Doing a walkthrough of the house with Sabrina one last time, the place was full of echoes and reverberations that

magically disappeared when the home had furniture in it. We left it better than we found it. Repairs had been done, tweaks made to small things like door latches. Some of the window trim that had popped loose on the front of the house had been secured and repainted. There were beautiful wooden blinds in the windows now. Shelves that we'd installed were left in place. The plastic taste of the tap water, a result of the flexible piping used in many new homes and whatever particles it releases, had been mostly washed away by our use, hopefully kept out of our bodies by our water filter. I paused briefly at the top of the stairs, where there was a window looking out over the road. It was one of my favorite places in the house, just above our entryway, allowing me to see passing trains when the leaves were off the trees. The view also let me look down on our moving truck. It always felt like a grand space in our modest home. Mental image stored. Memory sealed.

We had a closing to get to. After signing a mountain of paperwork to purchase the home, there was very little for us to do as sellers. A fortunate thing, since there was a winter storm rolling into the city, with all its attendant winds and heavy rain. For the points east of town, things might be a little more interesting. Either way, we didn't want to spend much time signing papers at the title company when we could be putting miles behind us. Papers signed and pleasantries exchanged, we stepped out into the drizzling afternoon to drive as far as we could. Boise was the goal, which would make it a long evening for the two of us.

Picking our way through the city streets, we found Interstate 84. The rain was persistent, and as the basalt walls of the Columbia Gorge closed in around us the wind was funneled into a steadily increasing fury. I could see Sabrina fighting the air, watching from behind as the truck was buffeted side to side by cross winds. My empathy was felt in Lumpy's steering wheel as I held on against the pulsing and pushing of the storm. It was a wild little ride through the Gorge that afternoon with little time to glance out the window and appreciate the place. Mostly it was a time to worry about staying in my own lane and hope that Sabrina could do the same until we were clear of the worst of it.

Passing out of the Columbia Gorge and rounding the curve at Boardman, my thoughts turned to what was ahead: Cabbage Hill and the Blue Mountains. If the weather was bad where we were (and it was) then it would be worse up the hill.

Almost on cue, I began to see electronic road signs warning of a road closure ahead. I flipped on the AM radio to the traffic report, which confirmed the closure. We wouldn't be getting past Pendleton.

Sabrina and I pulled over at a nearby coffee shop to use their wifi and survey the road ahead. Closures blocked the interstate all the way to the Idaho border. The weather showed that what was rain at Starbucks rapidly turned to snow and ice in the Blues.⁴⁰ We had taken a gamble and reserved a room in Boise which was canceled with a phone call. A new reservation was secured in Pendleton, a fortunate thing considering how many people were likely to need one.

Pulling into the hotel, it was barely six o' clock but already dark for hours on a stormy winter night north of the 45th parallel. I was dreading the thought of having to drive all the way to Boise and both of us were already weary from a day of loading, paperwork, and storm fighting. We stayed and ate the complimentary dinner provided by the hotel, opting for some of their conveniently served hot soup in place of something organic, grass fed, and idealistic. We retired to the room to watch television, take a hot shower, and get to bed early for a good start on the next day.

WP

We awoke before dawn the next morning and checked the weather. The storm had passed and road reports revealed that the Hill was open and traffic was once again allowed to head east. Fueling up the vehicles, we faced the mountains.

The twisting climb was easy for most of the way, but near the top the road began to show the effects of the previous night's precipitation. A blanket of snow was on everything, with a low, slick coating on the road surface. Today would be another long day of driving. 30-per was about all we could safely manage on the highway, ticking up the total time this leg of the journey would consume. The farther east we traveled, the better the roads became. Before long, we were at the posted speed and roaring for Idaho.

Hours passed. Gasoline burned. Signs advertised Idahome, Juniper, Utah. More evidence of winter weather dusted the landscape and we stopped in Ogden to regroup. It was dark

40 The alternate title for this book is *Weather Changed by Altitude*.

again. Our weather research revealed that we'd caught up to the storm. Now Wyoming was feeling the freeze and the highways there were all closing. Tiny icons, each representing an accident, dotted the screen of our laptop as we examined the Wyoming Department of Transportation's road reports. Ogden would be our place of rest. We secured lodging and walked out into the cold night to find something hot to eat. A pizza parlor was busy with patrons and out on the street was a brilliant display of holiday spirit. Christmas lights were everywhere and we walked by an outdoor market ablaze with decorations, bellies full of hot food. It was a Christkindl market, following an old German tradition. The entire town seemed to be celebrating the season and Ogden's fervor was heartwarming enough to make it worth a walk in the biting desert cold.

The next morning was another pre-dawn departure. From Ogden, Utah to Ogden Street in Denver. That was our goal. The storm had passed and the roads in Wyoming were ready to take us through a snowy, sunny landscape to Colorado. We made good time across the State of One Area Code. Laramie was resplendent in a blanket of fresh, radiantly white snow and ice. I was glad for sunglasses as I admired the crystalline reflections and highlighted tree branches, trying to find something to love about the cold, brutal weather and being entirely successful.

At Cheyenne we turned south and made for the Front Range, opting to skip the Highway 287 shortcut, which was likely to be an icy death luge again. It wasn't long past Ft. Collins when the traffic picked up, reminding us that the region was full of people just like us, who wanted a nice place to live and a respectable wage to make that happen. Macole and Cathy had already picked up our keys and opened the doors of the apartment when we pulled in front of our building. It was sunny and in the 40's on a day when we'd seen something out of a winter postcard roll by our windows. Such is weather in this part of the country. Unpacking went smoothly and rapidly, what with the extra sets of arms around to aid us. Truck emptied and returned, apartment filled with boxes, we began our perennial process.

It was a "garden level" apartment, the landlord's euphemism for "basement". Windows let plenty of light in. It didn't take long to notice that the place was very well heated, to the point where those windows were opened to make it a bit less tropical. At least I wouldn't need to worry about keeping Sabrina

warm this year. Back at the place on MLK in Portland, we had to resort to buying a pair of oil-filled electric radiators to supplement the absolutely loathsome heating ability of wall-mounted units under high ceilings. The “fireplace” in that apartment was a cruel simulacrum, putting a dancing picture of a fire and a hot air blower where wood combustion and hot plasma should have been. That’s when I noticed the source of all the heat in our new place: thick pipes running all along the ceiling of our apartment, humming softly with the sounds of a water circulating pump. We had landed a place through which the main water lines for the heating system traveled. Just about any other family probably would have been barbecued out the door. Sabrina was in heaven.

The apartment itself was a little awkward, with a small kitchen and cramped dining room. The bathroom had a toilet that shifted slightly when someone sat on it. We reported that to the maintenance man, who reassured us that the caulking he applied under the toilet would solve this problem. (It doesn’t.) It also had a lovely living room which featured all the extra square footage that the kitchen and dining area didn’t have, nice wooden floors, and the aforementioned windows kept it bright and cozy.

All of this was purchased at somewhat of a premium, since Denver had become very desirable and Capitol Hill was as popular as it ever was. Finding on-street parking (the only option) was a challenge I remembered from my first apartment, not five blocks from where we were. The reward was in the form of groceries. When it came time for us to fill up the fridge, we simply walked two blocks and loaded ourselves with as much as we could carry. Two other options were just as close. And although I needed to park my bike in the living room, I could at least ride it everywhere I wanted to go.

So ride I did. I tested a route to what would be my new job, a little over five miles north-west-ish from the house. It didn’t take long to realize that it would be pretty easy to do, especially if I could get my coveted afternoon shift, allowing me to ride home on empty streets at night

Not long before starting the new job in January, I called and pulled out of the first job offer I’d received, which would have been at least as fun but paid about six fewer dollars per hour. Practicalities occasionally enter into our decision-making processes. Sabrina was taken aboard at the city once again, but working for the human services department. She was mostly

looking for a way to get in the door, through which she could walk to another, more suitable position. We began pressing Macole to start looking for work, which didn't take all that much persuasion. She'd been working for a burrito shop in Portland and seemed to enjoy having her own money. Come to that, we enjoyed it too. Now the focus would be for her to begin saving some of that cash to put toward her first apartment, a pretty huge moment in anyone's life. That was our situation.

Every time I've moved back to Denver, it's been a little comforting. I know the streets, I know the landscape, which way is west. I definitely didn't grow up in the Mile High City, but I feel like I came of age there, which is more important when I look back on it. I will occasionally catch myself referring to Hokendaqua, Pennsylvania as "home". I spent the first 17 years of my life there, my parents still live there, in the home of my youth, and my sister is a short walk from them. Still, the sentiment associated with the word *home* seems to be less fitting there than it does when I use it in connection with Colorado. Something about the western part of the country has captivated me and sunk its hooks into my flesh. I crave what it has to offer and look forward to a visit to pretty much any of its wild and various destinations. It's been my frontier, my strange antidote to the poisonous boredom and musty traditions of the Old East, a place I can live where the people think differently. Talk differently. The cities don't have the same feel. It is as much about the new and different as it is simply that I found something I love.

28. Spring had come to the Front Range. Breathing in the warm air reminded me that not only was summer close at hand, but so too was a snowstorm. I was on my way to work by car, leaving the bike in the living room on account of the forecast. It was April. March is usually the big month for snow but I've been in Denver enough to have seen it in April and May. Gray-hairs like my friend Henry have seen it in June. The weather is a constant source of fascination and frustration for many people, but particularly in the shadow of the Rockies, where its gods are legitimately insane. I believe it was a TV meteorologist in Denver who was once asked, "We can land people on the moon, so why can't we accurately predict the weather here?" He responded, "Because landing on the moon is easier."

I was now thoroughly enjoying my work operating the

fast trains that would soon haul thousands of people to Denver's airport. Opening day was set for Earth Day, the 22nd. Many bugs were being worked out of the system and there was an upbeat feel to most of what we were doing. The public was clamoring for the trains, having approved the money for them years ago. I would remark many times to my coworkers, more than a few of them furloughed freight railroaders who had found refuge running passenger trains, that it was the best railroad job I'd had.

Sabrina was not enjoying the human services department. Helping many of the people who require assistance also requires exposure to some of the least desirable people in the city. Some of those seeking assistance do not actually need it or have no intention of ever improving their situations. It's a fact that keeps many more conservative people in the country staunchly opposed to all forms of social assistance, even though the greater number of those coming for help are in genuine need of it. There's a big argument here. The smaller issue that was more immediate to my wife was that it was just an unpleasant place to work. Many of her days were spent looking through the job postings for transfer opportunities. In the meantime, Macole had drummed up some work at a local grocery store, and seemed to be adjusting to the nine-to-five with astonishing ease. This will probably not be the last time I marvel at the young woman's ability to make her own way, considering my doubts about my abilities as a role model and parent. She's fortunately had Sabrina to look up to and teach her the ropes, and there are few better mothers in the world.

None of that was on my mind as I streaked through the snow in my little train, the heavy and wet flakes plastering themselves on every surface. The two most urgent things requiring attention were visibility and stopping distance, both of which were quite poor. There were still no passengers on the trains but we were running according to the schedule that would be used when Earth Day arrived. Problems ensued. Track switches malfunctioned. Crossing gate arms were forced to the ground by the weight of the snow. I was late getting home. It was my Friday, so I was just glad I wouldn't be out there dealing with the stuff the next couple of days, when more snow was predicted.

Morning revealed that the windows of our basement apartment were mostly covered under feet of white stuff. I went out to an open area in our little courtyard, stuck a tape measure down toward the grass, and measured around 20 inches. There

were significantly deeper drifts elsewhere. Returning inside with that information, Sabrina and I came up with an idea. The city had shut down, so she had off from work with me. There was a nicely sized hill nearby. It was sledding time.

WP

Neither of us had been out for any sort of winter sporting activities in some years. Not long after we met, I badgered Sabrina into joining me for a train trip to the mountains. We were taking Amtrak's California Zephyr, but the Denver and Rio Grande Western started running a similar service many decades previous from Denver Union Station to Winter Park, Colorado. They called it the Ski Train. It was a morning trip, a little over 50 miles. The ski area in Winter Park would then entertain the passengers until it was time to leave that afternoon and the train was there at the resort, waiting for them to board. The D&RGW was history but the Ski Train was still running at that time, and it was a nice ride through the snowy mountains for those who chose to take it. The Zephyr, our only choice during the off-season, is a long-distance train from Chicago to San Francisco that would also take you from Denver to the town of Fraser, not too far from Winter Park. Bundled up in our winter clothing, we made for the train and took the leisurely ride up the Continental Divide. Deboarding, we set out for our destination: the Fraser Tubing Hill.

A local tradition, the hill is fairly large and reasonably steep. For a fee, we rented inner tubes and enjoyed sailing down the hill among many other happy tubers, only to be pulled up again by a neat little cable lift that dragged inner tube and rider back to the top for another go. It was very fun, very cold, and after a little over an hour, we were ready to find some hot chocolate.

We made our way through town and found a place to stop and eat. There were several hours to kill until we needed to be back at the station for our return trip. I envisioned sitting in front of a ski lodge fire, sipping something hot and sweet. Sabrina shared that vision and we located a shuttle up to Winter Park. Anyone familiar with ski towns already knows what we found: most everything was closed, no lodges with roaring fires, and the only hot beverages came from a coffee shop chain. A couple of weeks later and we'd have been dodging people's ski

poles amidst a rainbow sea of waterproof/breathable fabric. Seasonal sport has a seasonal nature. Back to the train station we wandered, somewhat bored and a bit cold. Out of the rapidly setting sun came Number Six, and we settled in for a warm, scenic ride back home.

WP

The resolve to go sledding was met with a critical logistics problem: we were a pair of 30-somethings with no young kids in the house. This is also known as the no-rational-reason-to-have-sleds-in-the-house issue. We floated some ideas, exchanging memories of things placed under ass to facilitate the required sliding for winter fun time. Then, inspiration. We had our trusty giant plastic tubs and more importantly, their giant plastic *lids*. The lids seemed to have the correct contours, and it would be a crude but effective way to please our inner children. We selected a couple different options and bundled up for our little walk to the hill.

The snow was deep and heavy, a typical late season storm. Downed limbs were everywhere in the neighborhood. It was a fairly quiet walk past houses full of people having snow days. Arriving at our hill, there was nobody else there. I was surprised that the kids weren't out carving paths and making jumps in the snow but video games are also a viable option for weather of that type.

It was slow going at first. It would have helped to have about five more bodies to help us pack down the thick layer of powder into something sleddable. As it was we just made dozens of trips, the walk back up the hill keeping us warm. Anyone who frequented their neighborhood sledding hill as a kid knows exactly what this looks and feels like. Eventually we had a decent path and found the lids that worked the best. The cold and stresses of sledding conspired to crack one of them. We slid, flipped over, rolled in the snow. An angel or two appeared on the hill. A child with grandparent in tow happily joined us for some good old fashioned entertainment. Tired and wet but warm, we finished our excursion and went home to enjoy the heat radiating from hot water pipes and from the chocolate in our mugs.

The coming weeks saw the opening of the commuter rail line and my first experiences hauling passengers down the rails. It was fun and the trains were popular, a healthy combination. I

won't pretend as though there weren't hiccups, delays, malfunctions, odd situations involving alcohol and vomit, but it was still fun.

Sabrina was still in her job at human services, still hating it. She began floating the idea of moving to Grand Junction with increasing frequency. I was still against it but the more she talked about it, the more it seemed to make sense. Now, under normal circumstances with more normal people, this would have been the end of it. We were a bit more complicated. Macole was doing well at her job and had begun squirreling away the money she'd need to move out on her own. That part was going very well. The two “adults” of the family were still getting frustrated by being in a big city. Sabrina was especially becoming affected by the grind of her work, the lack of other options, and the magnetic pull of a town that she truly loved more than I fully understood. It took quite a bit of talking. First among my reservations was the fact that I had a job that paid well and was fun, which would be replaced by an unknown job that wouldn't pay nearly as much money. My second problem with the idea was burnout. I really didn't want to move again so soon. Rents were going up all around us, with every indication that ours would be next. I don't mean to paint our place as a shabby dump, but we were a couple of tiers from the top. This was for a place with a rocking toilet, not to mention laundry room “visitors”.

One early morning, upon coming home from work, I rolled up to the alley door of the apartment building. It was the easiest way to bring my bicycle into the place. Walking down the small staircase and rolling down the hall past the laundry room, the door was mostly closed. Stopping at the apartment door to let myself in, I could hear something from inside the laundry room. I deposited my things in our place and then went back to investigate. Flipping on the light revealed a pair of young homeless people squatting in the corner for the night. It was winter at that time and quite cold, so I didn't say much. The light woke them and what little conversation we had involved them leaving as soon as possible closer to morning. I figured, hey, if these folks kept warm in here tonight I'm pretty cool with that.

The next day, I found that the people had indeed left, and had gifted the residents with not only their smell (forgivable), but also a few articles of their clothing and some garbage (gross). After a little clean-up, a work order was started for the back door of the building, which a child could break into, and a notice

given to the owners about what had happened. A few weeks prior to the laundry room incident, we'd actually heard (our apartment was close to the front door of the building) a heated exchange between a pissed off resident and the man who was evidently tearing open a package in the entryway. It was another homeless person, waltzing into the building and grabbing whatever he could find that the mail carriers had left outside the locked portion of the building. Mailboxes showed evidence of having been pried open.

This was not a bad neighborhood. I never once felt threatened while walking the streets of Capitol Hill. I didn't blame the homeless folks so much as the property managers, who had recklessly left crucial access points essentially open and unguarded. Incredibly, the mail carriers seemed just fine with dropping packages in unsecured spaces. The homeless have always, for some reason, had a presence in Denver unlike many other cities of its size. Portland had them, but the winters are mild and the people are liberal. Denver shares the political alignment but features winters which frequently get brutal cold snaps. Perhaps the police in Denver weren't as harsh as they might be in other cities. We were used to people digging through the dumpsters and have left things out there on occasion specifically for people to grab. I once handed a pair of Army-issued winter boots to a man who was *inside* a dumpster behind my first Denver studio. I still have a pair of milk crates salvaged from an alley, given new life as members of our moving equipment brigade. The disadvantaged people were part of the landscape. We just didn't want them breaking into our home and stealing our things, which I think is a reasonable line to draw.

I know that homelessness isn't always taken up by choice, but I also know that in a good many cases it actually is. There are quite a few people, if you take the time to talk to them, who would reveal that they don't want a job, or a house, or any of the other jewelry of domesticity. They want their freedom and they're not afraid to sacrifice for it. If begging and smelling like armpits means they get to do what they want all day, every day, then they're going to make a cardboard sign and find a good intersection, because slaving away behind a desk isn't going to work for them. A part of me identifies with this. There is more than a little of their lust for independence swirling in my chest too.

WP

You know what happens next. The headline reads, “Stupid American Couple Inexplicably Gives Up Stable Employment in Pursuit of Greener Pastures; Inside Sources Blame Lack of Discipline, Suspect Stereotypical Millennial Generational Associations”. My mother had so many entries in her address book that she just sighed and asked me for the new one without much discussion. Henry asked me, yet again, when we'd be back.

Macole, on the other hand, was feeling the burn. For the first time since I joined the family, she'd be staying behind. The push during the last few months in Denver was to find her an apartment. She had a roommate to help with the costs, and I toured a property with the two of them that was nice for the price and closer to her work than our little basement unit in Capitol Hill. It was a better place than the studio apartment I moved into 15 years prior, at any rate.

Sabrina and I would be moving in with our friends Ally and Casey, a cohabitating couple in Palisade, Colorado. They had a large house with a mortgage and having us rent a room would make that process easier. There was already one other renter in the place, so it would be a bit of a community atmosphere until we could find a place to rent in nearby Grand Junction.

I was still a little wary of the move. I don't want to venture into cheeseball territory, but the truth of it was that I trusted Sabrina's judgment. She was seeing something there that I evidently could not. I raised my objections and talked it over with her, heavily weighing the importance of her intuition. We at least agreed that the traffic and crush of activity that had become normal in Denver wasn't a healthy thing for us even if it kept the trains packed with people and thus money in our bank accounts. Sabrina's mother was on a fixed income and the lower costs of living in Junction would allow us to find her a place that was both cheaper and more peaceful than some of the housing she'd been living in the past few years. It seemed like a very easy choice to make and although leaving a job I like is never easy, I still love the feeling of shedding responsibilities, of leaving concerns behind. Perhaps not the most mature of characteristics, but my enjoyment is undeniable.

I turned in my notice at work and tried to squeeze as much pleasure from running the trains as I could during my final days. The feeling struck me that I'd never do anything like it again, making me immediately nostalgic. There was no premonition here, no spiritual awakening, no wise inner voice which told me this. It was the simple logic of having had more chances to go railroading than anyone deserves and realizing that my luck was probably running out. I also didn't want to leave Grand Junction if that was where we were going. The only two railroads there had already employed me and watched me leave, something they don't forget about. I kept telling Sabrina that I'd find *something* in GJ, but I secretly worried that whatever it ended up being would probably not make me half as happy as the job I was getting ready to leave. Something the wise inner voice *did* tell me then was that I didn't know everything and that there was a very good chance of finding something that I enjoyed in an unexpected place like the edge of the desert in western Colorado. My last day came and went. My supervisor wished me well and sent me off with the suggestion that I call him if/when we came back to Denver. I thanked him and pedaled home with the contents of my locker bouncing in the panniers behind me.

29. A new chapter for another move.

This one felt like a cross-town slide with a mountain range in the middle. It was June, a great time for crossing the Rockies. The truck we rented was small. This was mostly due to a great shedding of possessions that occurred as we ushered Macole into her new independent life, rocket fuel for her launch. We'd given her our living room furniture and dining room set. Odds and ends were shoved her way as much for our ease of moving as for her comfort in her new place. Cathy bought her a mountain of household supplies, something she's been doing for years whether we needed the stuff or not. This time was the right time, right place. It was all very serendipitous. A group of Macole's friends arrived in a pickup truck to help cart away all her things. I remember being in awe of the number of people that were willing to help move boxes, mostly because I could never generate as many bodies even with bribes. I'd spent much time and effort reducing my possessions to the point that moving didn't require much help, but that's beside the point.

Not long after Macole's departure, we turned in our keys

and toward the mountains. There was no lease to sign, no warnings to the landlord that we'd be doing this "sight unseen", and no security deposit to pay. We simply left Ogden Street and showed up in Palisade, ready to unload a small truck's worth of stuff into someone else's house. For the first time in my life, we needed to lease a storage unit for some things which just wouldn't fit in the bedroom we were renting. We kept a handful of things in the garage along with the contents of Casey's displaced music room. We weren't paying much for rent, so the small extra fee for storage wasn't a big deal. Truck unloaded, storage unit filled and locked, we returned to our new home.

The first thing a person is likely to notice about Palisade is the enormous formation of bookcliffs that form the northern edge of town. A giant geological compass standing raw, exposed and beautiful in any light, those cliffs are a reminder of what Palisade would look like were it not for irrigation. That irrigation has turned the town into an agricultural wonderland, covered with orchards, vineyards, and small farms. There are no mega farms or huge mechanized conglomerations, just enough of an influence that most things in Palisade seem to make mention of one of their most prized crops: peaches. Casey has told us that, historically, you could not be said to have eaten an actual peach unless the juice was running down your chin and someone was screaming at you for eating it in the house. Palisade has had orchards since the late 19th century at least, but the native people of the region are rumored to have grown them long before then. The Palisade peaches that I've eaten have been worthy of that long lineage. None of the offerings from any other part of the country seem to come close.

It was a hot, typical summer day when we arrived, and we were welcomed to the house by a home-cooked meal. We followed that up with a walk near the Colorado River, a couple blocks away, and fought off the mosquitoes patrolling the area in the summer's evening hours. Up near the house the little bloodsuckers were much less annoying, so time spent on the front porch staring at the scenery was a pleasure.

This was straight-up small town living. Kids playing in the street, Ally's brother living just across the way in a house he had helped build. In fact, the house that we were staying in was Ally's, built in no small part by her and Casey as members of a group of folks that participated in a housing program. This allowed all the participants to have a hand in the construction of

their own homes, helping out all the others in the group as each of their structures were built. The homes were sold to them at a lower price as compensation for their efforts. The end result was Ally's lovely ranch home, family in shouting distance, in a lovely little area on a street named after a varietal of grape.

The first few days of residence in the house felt like a vacation. It was just what Sabrina and I needed after many years of fast-paced, populous city living. We bought wine (made in the Grand Valley, of course) and sipped it on the porch, waiting for the July storms to roll by, dumping a bit of rain and leaving behind the intoxicating smell of wet desert earth. The moisture could be seen on the hills, contrasting with the normally desiccated colors of the rocks and dust, highlighting the cracks, crevices, and relief of the place in true painterly fashion. We visited farm stands. We cooked and washed up. We helped feed the chickens and ducks in the small backyard and tended to the garden. We pulled weeds out of the xeriscaped front yard, a lovely example of Ally's gardening prowess. Mormon tea, prickly pear, and yucca poked out of a rocky bed, showing a range of colors and textures that get desert people all fired up about their otherwise inhospitable environment.

In my walks, I tend to gravitate toward the railroad tracks. I like watching a train go by, even if I haven't necessarily always enjoyed being employed by a railroad. In Portland I would go for walks in the Brooklyn neighborhood, watching the trains race by the old Southern Pacific roundhouse, which has since been razed. In Denver I could follow Lakewood Gulch from the Hooker house and get into the South Platte valley to watch BNSF trains move coal to Texas. In Palisade, the trains were there but I found myself drawn to the river and the surrounding areas. Negotiating the relentless mosquitoes in the evening, I would walk the river trail and contemplate the sunset. It also gave me time to think about what the hell I was going to do for work. This type of thinking-on-the-hoof has been a habit of mine for some years. And while I've noticed that it tends to follow the path of trains, I've also noticed that it *always* follows the path of water. Any walking route I've taken and enjoyed enough to repeat indefinitely has featured a body of water. The Willamette on my Brooklyn walks. Lakewood Gulch is as wet as the South Platte river it drains to. Walking the other direction from the Hooker house took me to Sloan's Lake. Shipspotting on the Savannah River. In Palisade, the Colorado river and the

muddy, forceful waters of the irrigation ditches were my companions. Growing up in Pennsylvania, the Lehigh River was never far, usually within eyesight.

There's a well-worn sentence that would fit here, one that waxes lyrical about time and material flows, and a little life that mimics the energy of those flows. A sentence that just wants to bubble out of me like a flatulent grammatical visitor, both unwelcome and uninvited. It's somewhat of a curse borne by those who've been warped by philosophical thinking. Once you start looking for connections between seemingly unrelated things, trying to unwrap the cognitive mystery that might surround them, it can be very difficult to turn off. The tendency for people (and not just people) to settle near water is well-documented. Where there is no fresh water, there won't be many people. I'd simply never really noticed the pattern at the individual level until writing this book. So, like countless creatures before me I ventured near the closest source of flowing fresh water, beating back the parasites that were expecting me to show up, and took in some refreshment in the form of lovely scenery and free-flowing thoughts.

WP

In Grand Junction, low costs of living were balanced by a far less robust economy. There were jobs, but most of them produced much lower income than we were accustomed to. We'd expected this. Many of the positions were with uninspiring companies doing very pedestrian things: retail, warehouse, food service, sales, administrative assistant, auto repair. I was not above it. I'd seen my share of rejections and offers. The real money was in oil and gas, staffing drilling rigs in Colorado and elsewhere, a career disqualified by ideological self-exclusion, not to mention awful hours, scofflaw business tactics, and very little consideration for worker health and safety beyond what is browbeat into bosses by regulatory agencies.

My first two offers came almost simultaneously that August, about two months into our stay. One was for an instructional assistant at a local college for a field I hadn't actually worked in (electrical lineworker), and the other was a job at a machine shop making weapons parts for the government.

The assistant's job paid well, although it was a version of the instructor position I'd held at the railroad school. It was

difficult enough teaching something I knew. Mostly it was the students who typically enrolled that were difficult, but still. I really wasn't feeling it. I wanted to try the machine shop, since I'd never done machining before and my father really liked his career as a machinist. It was the path less traveled and I figured it was a transferable skill that I could take with me just about anywhere. That transferability was key: I was planning on using the machine shop as a career gym to train me in the art of machining so I could go make bicycle components or something less sinister. Sabrina found a position working for, wait for it, the Department of Human Services in Mesa County. Sigh. Much smaller and more tolerable than Denver, it was still nonetheless a hassle.

I took a test ride to the machine shop during the high heat of a July day to familiarize myself with the route and decide if it made sense to make it a regular thing. It was about 13 miles one way, farther than I've ever commuted. I was very concerned about the length of time it would take, especially since I'd be working a 10 hour shift that started at three o'clock in the afternoon. Satisfied with my testing, I figured out what tools I'd need to carry for things like flat tires and extreme thirst. When I actually began to ride on those two days each week, it was amazing. Most of the way was fairly flat. Although the surrounding landscape is full of giant mesas and looming bookcliffs, the floor of the Grand Valley is very level, which gave me a great profile over which to roll my little bike tires. I packed extra water and a change of clothes waited for me in my locker at work. It was a hot, sweaty ride into the shop but the path took me through lovely farmland with light traffic.

The way home was even better. I had wisely fitted my bike with brackets for lighting, noticing that many of those quaint farm roads wouldn't be lit by anything other than the stars and moon. I'd never ridden in such complete darkness before, which turned out to be very fun. For those 13 miles home in the wee hours of the morning, I might pass four or five other vehicles. Sometimes not even that many. Mysterious rustling occurred in the roadside brush. Occasional dark shapes could be seen on the road ahead, darting out of my path as I approached. And the stars...

Sabrina had long been selling the idea of the stars to me, specifically the fact that in this part of the world, looking up at night meant that more than just the 10 or 15 brightest stars would

be visible. Shortly after arriving in Palisade, we were out one night and just decided to drive up one of the dark country roads to pull over and stare up. The drapery of lights above us was lovely. Eventually our eyes allowed us to see the Milky Way splashed across the sky.

The starry view was my backdrop on my bike rides home in the dark. The light of the moon illuminated the bookcliffs like a row of accent lighting, a primordial piece of installation art. One evening, I caught something out of the corner of my eye. I was unsure what I'd seen until I saw another: *meteor*. I had forgotten about the Perseids. I was enough of an astronomy nerd to know what was happening, though not enough of one to have ever taken any time to go out and actually watch a meteor shower. On that warm summer night, I had nothing to do but pedal home for the next hour under a crystal clear sky. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I stopped in the middle of an empty road and switched off my headlight to stare at the heavens. Whatever else I thought about having to ride so far for work, about being paid so little, about being frustrated, that was a great night. I always looked forward to my rides back to Palisade, smelling the cool desert air and the aroma of freshly cut alfalfa fields and lavender farms. There was one brave dog that was obsessed with going into a barking frenzy and running after me for a bit before realizing my wheels were faster than his little legs. It was often after two in the morning when I arrived back at home, three or four when I retired. I didn't see much of the other people in the house until the weekends. This is how it went for about a month until we decided to change it again.

Sabrina never expected her Mesa County job to last very long, but neither did she expect to have the opportunity to work from home. Her old employer from Portland was still in touch and expressed interest in having her work remotely to handle the many tasks that needed doing. Excited about the opportunity to have a home office, Sabrina gladly accepted the offer. The only hitch was that our small rented room with shared internet wasn't going to support the venture. We had about two weeks to figure out where to go. I did the legwork of touring places to find a suitable spot. It seemed a luxury to be able to actually *look* at a place before renting it and it didn't take long to pick a condo we could rent for roughly half of what we were paying in Denver.

In a whirlwind of activity, we packed up. Then, Casey approached us. "You guys are moving?" And this is how we

completely forgot to tell our friends that we were moving out of their house. I thought Sabrina did it. She thought I did it. We both just kind of assumed that they knew what we were up to somehow. It was embarrassing and we paid them for an extra month's rent for putting up with us and probably budgeting our income into their lives. We're still really good friends with them.

Zip. Bang. Boom. Into a new place. I had shaved 10 miles off the ride to work and Sabrina had eliminated her commute entirely. Our new home had a spare bedroom which quickly turned into her workspace. No more enchanting night rides out to Palisade, but my journey now only took about 15 minutes on the way home through empty streets.

We spent much of our off time getting to know the Grand Valley, or in Sabrina's case, getting re-acquainted with it. This meant taking hikes, going for bike rides in wine country, tubing down the Colorado river, and visiting sites of nostalgic interest.

Moon Rock, one of the sites in question, is located on a winding road that skirts the edge of Colorado National Monument, a lovely park filled with fantastic rock formations and pinyon forests. There's only a small, nondescript pull-out with some parking spaces to greet you. Then there's a short walk through those pinyon pines and junipers. At last, I approached the short climb to the spot I'd long heard about in Sabrina's stories. That's when I realized that Moon Rock was *enormous*.

My mind's eye had seen a big boulder, strategically placed on the side of a hill from which there was a good view of the city. Stepping on to the top of the thing revealed that it was actually a slab of stone at least as big as a football field, and that was only the part I could see. Smooth and light-colored, it stood out on the hillside, which explained how my wife had been able to just look up toward the Monument from town and point to it. Since I was expecting a boulder, I had missed the planet-sized piece of rock.

There were others up there with us and it didn't disappoint with its panoramic view of the entire Grand Valley. A mountain biker rode over the top and down its sloping face to find some of the trails in the area. It took me a minute to realize a few things. First, this was obviously an area of value to the locals and many people probably took the trip for all sorts of reasons. Next, it was almost pristine. Among the trees and rocks of this place, I saw only one or two broken bottles and nothing else. I

remembered sites in Hokendauqua used for similar recreational purposes. The ruins of the Thomas Iron Works. Old railroad bridges. Trails through the woods leading to swimming holes or secluded spots to get out of the eyes of the neighbors. Those places were usually covered with litter, painted with pictures of dicks and backwards swastikas.

How it is that places of local interest in Hokey⁴¹ got so trashed, while those in our little western hometown were left in fine shape reveals something about the local culture. During my time in Pennsylvania and visits to the east, there is evidence of a throw-your-trash-out-the-window approach. Not that this never happens out west, but the people of the Grand Valley seemed to have an ingrained sense of appreciation and respect for the natural world around them. Most people hike. It's hard to find someone who doesn't drive up to the Grand Mesa to enjoy the cool air and fall colors. Everyone has a mountain bike and actually rides it in the mountains. West of Junction, the town of Fruita uses bicycle imagery in its jaunty little town flags which flap from every light post downtown. The people of the Grand Valley are connected to their surroundings in a way very different from the sort of connection displayed by the typical easterner.

It might be that the east has just been settled longer and more densely. There are more people in close proximity there. Natural, untouched areas are more scarce. It's harder to just grab your gun and go shoot at an old TV in the middle of nowhere, which may not be the most respectful or sensible uses of public land, but is nonetheless used in the desert as a sort of social safety valve to relieve the stresses of everyday life. Whatever the cause, it's something I'd notice on each and every one of my walks through the Grand Valley, and standing atop Moon Rock admiring its size and relative cleanliness made me truly appreciate the value of a local culture that doesn't shit where it stands. Or at least one that has a designated area off in the mud mounds and sand dunes where it's socially acceptable to be a little trashy and stupid.

It might also be the dirt curse. While the Ute people were being forced from their Grand Valley homes and onto reservations, they are rumored to have cursed all who were (and

41 Pronounced like the sport. Although the other option produces an appropriate double entendre.

would be) born in the area with the irresistible drive to return. It is a bond placed between the people of the valley and its soil. If you want to leave the valley, soil from the Colorado National Monument, the bookcliffs, and the Grand Mesa must be collected and kept nearby forever. Versions of the curse exist, with my wife's telling featuring an extra helping of soil from one's own backyard, just for good measure. Another iteration extends not only to those who were born in the valley, but those who have merely lived there. One wonders whether this curse was actually the Utes imploring the new residents to respect and watch over the land, to never let it go uncared for, misheard by the Europeans or warped by the passage of time. It also seems easy to imagine that there were a number of curses hurled at the strange visitors who seemed none too friendly. Either way, the curse may have helped grant the people of the area with an appreciation for their surroundings that is sadly rare in most of the rest of the country. After all, if they're doomed to stay forever and always return, they might as well take care of the place.

30. I was exactly two months into my machining career when I decided I couldn't do it anymore. I knew the score before I was even offered the job, the low pay, the long shifts spent in front of a machine. (If you're curious: 4 10-hour shifts, \$9.02 per hour. In 2016.) Not my first factory job. Realizing just how little I could expect to make in this line of work did get me in a bit of a funk, though, after opening a few paychecks and weighing that against what it had taken to produce them.

For a few weeks, my boredom at the job was increasing. I had a good grasp of the work, and though I didn't know it all by any stretch I wasn't curious enough to learn more. The problems that came up didn't have interesting solutions. I was looking at the people above me in the pecking order and realized that I didn't want their jobs. I kept thinking that this gamble was not going to pay and that I had made a big, fat, smelly mistake.

I had talked to Sabrina about leaving. She's always one to encourage happiness, something this job wasn't providing. I remember thinking about a couple things on that last day. I had never walked off a job before. I always give my notice, serve my time, and then walk away with a handshake and a hearty goodbye. I also remember thinking about how beautiful it was that October, amazing weather and leaves, too lovely to be assailed with the boredom and malaise of the inside of that

damned shop. The inner philosopher always has his say.

I cleaned up my machine and sat down with my supervisor, telling him it would be my last night. He seemed disappointed but not surprised, as if maybe he'd just lost a small bet. They had quite a bit of turnover in this particular shop, and after learning more about the pay scale it wasn't hard to imagine a reason why. Unlocking my bike with a bag full of the contents of my locker, I started thinking. It felt fantastic to be done with that job. I breathed the cool autumn air on the quiet nighttime streets of Grand Junction, happy with myself. A person could get addicted to this feeling and perhaps I am, the shedding of what's detrimental and obviously wrong, unloading responsibilities.

I was also thinking of all the good people I've left behind over the years at various jobs, and no exception here. There were helpful, knowledgeable people everywhere and they had taught me whatever they knew about whatever it was I happened to be doing. During the interview, when they walked me around the shop, I could see that the folks there seemed well-adjusted and good-natured. It was actually one of the things that made me seriously consider taking the position. It's almost a shame that those good people can't make up for lack of interest. It's nice to be around others who make you feel welcome and are willing to teach. However, if that isn't also joined by sincere interest and curiosity, it's just not going to work.

I left that job without a firm plan of where I would go. I just had a gut feeling that what I was doing was the wrong thing. My body was rejecting the work in a visceral, tangible sense. Sabrina was making enough to cover the basics, so there was no immediate need. I would have stayed had it been necessary. My departure ushered in a months-long unemployment stretch which I used to keep writing and walking, soaking up the rest of the season with a sense of joy that I was doing the right thing and a foreboding sense of concern that I didn't have a direction. I settled into a lovely daily routine that I wish I could keep for the rest of my life. Still searching for work all the while, I was much more selective about positions I applied for, trying to find genuine interest instead of just a job for a job's sake.

In those autumn evenings, when Sabrina was teaching yoga classes as a money-making diversion from her telecommuting, I would tag along and hit the trail behind the yoga studio, following a nearby irrigation outflow. It was Gunnison River water flowing toward the Colorado, having

finished its work of supplying some of the area farms with life. A small hydro power station sat along a good-sized drop in the channel, making the most of the water's energy before sending it on its way. The cottonwoods were the vibrant gold I'd come to expect, highlighted by the searing reds of the skunkbush underneath.

It was often just after sundown on my way back and I'd be serenaded by the creepy hooting of great horned owls. Stopping and watching the tree tops would reveal the large predators winging from branch to branch, beginning a night of hunting. Something about the crisp evening air, fallen leaves, and owlsong touches something very primitive in the brain, producing cravings for woodsmoke, forest, and cider.

Fortunately, nearby Paonia, Colorado has a ciderfest every year. It's a small, granola town nestled into the shoulder of the Grand Mesa. Apples need it a little cooler and wetter than the valley floor provides, so the town sits at about a mile above sea level, where it is granted both of those wishes. Cedaredge. Hotchkiss. Orchard City. Within just a few square miles, the people of the region have taken advantage of the apple-friendly environment and they make some damn fine beverages out of the delicious fruits.

WP

As the long, warm autumn gave way to a mild winter and my joblessness wasn't improving, we began to explore other options. It was the week before Christmas, 2016 that I found myself 2,000 miles from home in Allentown, Pennsylvania at a hotel right next to the airport. Planes could be heard taxiing and taking off from the small field just across, appropriately enough, Airport Road. The same sound that, depending on weather conditions, could be heard from my childhood home not five miles away. I was awaiting notification of an interview time, sitting in the lobby, looking business-like, tapping away on my laptop in a suit.

I'd done this several times before. If hired, it would be my sixth railroad job and most of them have had hiring sessions like this. I arrived with about 40 other people, sat through the informational presentations, was offered the chance to leave if I didn't like what I heard, and then I took a test. These tests are always designed ensure one is able to screw things in, operate a

lever, read a measuring device. To test for the understanding that large, massive things can kill a person. There is usually the standard fare of reading comprehension questions. The largest portion of the test battery is designed to give a general psychological profile of an applicant, to see if she is railroad material. After taking so many of these, a person begins to figure out just what the questions are really asking and giving the “correct” answers becomes a matter of applying the railroad’s stated “visions and values” to the answers. They never find out much about my personality apart from my familiarity with what the railroad expects of me, and perhaps that’s the goal. The previous year I was helping students make sense of this testing process, developing my own sample questions, teaching them the secret handshake to get them in the door. Pending the results of the testing and a quick look over the applications that have been submitted, a list of people is then posted on a door and those people get to interview for the job. Probably half of the people who attend will actually get interviews.

The people around me were chatting in predictable fashion: talking about the questions on the test, verifying their answers against one another in that odd way that you do when you’re *pretty* sure you answered correctly, but you’d like to bounce it off someone else anyway. There is also an odd camaraderie that develops at these events. You spend most of the day there, arriving before eight (The doors are usually locked precisely at the start time, a punctuality test.) and ending when the last person interviews at three or four o’clock. If you interview early, you leave early. For most people, there’s plenty of dead time spent waiting, which is remarkably like the job itself. This leaves them free to talk about life but it mostly centers around jobs done, doing, or otherwise known about and to speculate on the career path they might be about to take. There’s usually at least one person who knows someone who works for the railroad. People nervously wish each other well before and after the interviews and it’s generally a good natured event all around. Despite the day’s activities being part of a well-worn program of events for me, I still get nervous at these things. It’s just not an interview without deodorant and pit stains, the subtle pressures of peer review.

I am dancing around the point, however, that I was no longer west of Pennsylvania. I’d flown out to the motherland specifically for two interviews, the other in not-so-nearby

Harrisburg. I had taken the exact same test yesterday and as far as I was aware, given the exact same answers. This was for work that I kind-of wanted. The financial and medical benefits of the position were such that I couldn't say no, but this was the sixth time around. The hiring managers in the conference room next to me were very aware that they weren't even my bronze medal. They weren't even watching the awards ceremony. I left other railroad jobs for very good reasons. My reasons for wanting to work in Allentown were equally good.

Railroading, however, is a career that is best suited to people who get a job and work it until retirement, a luxury for which I haven't always been willing to pay or able to afford. I was pretending to be a fixed, stable point in space, one that's never been unsure where to set up camp or unwilling to tolerate the intolerable. My history was speckled. I hadn't been in much trouble but my record of service in the railroad industry wasn't without fault. If I were a recruiter, I might look another way. The fact that I was invited to interview at all stands in the face of what I predicted as a 30-40 percent probability stemming from creative resume writing. Getting hired? Maybe the same percentage, probably lower. Despite this, there was a nearly 100 percent chance of living a better life in Pennsylvania with the job, or at least that's what I needed to tell myself in order to keep showing up in a suit, ready for review, hiding the damp spots under my arms. My wife was slowly getting frustrated with my lack of prospects in Grand Junction, though just how frustrated would take some time for me to learn.

In the end, it wasn't me who got an interview. My name wasn't on the list. It was on the door the day before, for the same job in Harrisburg, but not the second time. That's just the way these things go sometimes. It's a cost of being as mobile as we've been these past few years, of getting in the ring and taking your lumps. Employers get separation anxiety before the relationship even starts. It would be nice to be given a pass for living a quasi-nomadic life, to find a workplace that maybe even admires me a teensy bit for having had a few jobs, a few different experiences in my life. I'm not a bad guy once you get to know me.

It was the first job I'd applied for in Pennsylvania since my very first in 1996. It had been over twenty years since I started that job and just about as long since I'd lived in the Keystone State. There's been an ever-present pulling, a desire to

move westward, to follow the sun, ever since I left the first time. I've missed my family, love them dearly, but the desire to move back toward them has rarely been with me. Even now as I reflect on the rejection of that trip, I'm not perturbed by the idea of remaining distant. It's always been family-at-a-distance, relatives out of arms reach. It would be easier to call it simple selfishness, but far less accurate than what it actually is: a love of what's ahead, new, and novel. The grass isn't always greener in a new field, but it's always a different field. I realize I'm not doing much to dispel the notion of us as novelty-seekers and I hope one day I'll find a place to rest and stay until my dying day. The idea is alien to me now, although I know it won't always be. There won't always be stacks of moving boxes in the closet. Fatigue might just be the determining factor. When I return from these travels, I'm always world-beaten and happy to be home. It doesn't take very long after to look toward somewhere new and imagine myself there.

Some weeks later I would receive another email from the same railroad, inviting me to yet another interview session in Pittsburgh. They scheduled it for a Monday in January that in this country, normal people reserve for Martin Luther King Jr.'s holiday. The railroad loves these little games, though whether or not they play them intentionally is up for some debate: interview sessions right before Christmas, or on a holiday, or with two days' notice. I had taken on considerable expense in booking a trip to Pennsylvania with one week's warning during one of the busiest travel times of the year. That expense left me with a rare chance to visit my family during the holidays, but a big hole in my wallet with no employment to show for it. All for a one-sentence email saying that the people they selected were "better qualified." Bitterness doesn't even begin.

Martin Luther King Jr. day 2017 would come and go with me enjoying a mild winter's day at home in western Colorado. Just after eight o'clock in a Pittsburgh hotel, a Norfolk Southern hiring manager called my name.

31. I had 17 active job applications out there and a sheet of paper with user ID's and passwords for employment sites from top to bottom. Iowa. Ohio. Pennsylvania. Washington. Vermont. Massachusetts. I was not-quite-ready to live in those places, but that old fear of being jobless for too long pinched my chest every time I checked my bank account or took a good hard look at my

work history. Every time I looked at my wife and wondered how long she would put up with this. I realized, not for the first time, that I'd thought of myself as a career railroader for so long that imagining a different occupation, a different *lifestyle* was so disorienting that it scared me to do it. Many of those applications were for railroad jobs. I desperately wanted to be a man who could reinvent himself and become a better, more adaptable person. I was finding it something that didn't suit me as well as I'd hoped.

There were no illusions that I had anyone but myself to blame for the situation. I couldn't really blame the employers or the job market, couldn't blame Sabrina. I had reached a point where I was damn near unemployable, not because of some personality defect or criminal record but simply because I couldn't be trusted to stick around. Perhaps it actually *was* a sort of personality defect: the inability to subject myself to boring, vastly underpaid work with turd-quality benefits while treating it as a career. I realize that this will read as snobbish, bourgeois Millennial behavior. That's fine. I've paid my "dues". I've crawled through mud with a rifle, patrolled a factory floor, lifted boxes, volunteered, slogged through snow and rain. I've even managed to be well-compensated for some of it. I don't intend for this book to become a comment on the state of the American worker today but there's a reason why many people are choosing to stay out of the traditional, easily measurable workforce, confusing economists and the people who study things like employment rates.⁴²

Younger folks are discovering that it's an employer's market out there. Many organizations are just not willing to make it worthwhile to take a job, the income and benefits of which can be not-so-easily replaced by a driving gig with a phone based taxi firm and a custom content channel online. The side hustle generation, hoping the outpatient clinic can handle it when they walk in with pneumonia and no coverage.

For the majority of businesses out there, applicants are plentiful and expendable, not even worth the time it takes to type up a rejection email. The most qualified candidates are not always selected, by virtue of programming quirks in software

42 And in true, heavy-metal-made-my-kid-a-Satanist fashion, immersive video games have been (spuriously) implicated as a major factor keeping able-bodied people out of the workforce. Evidently the gamer on food stamps is looking like the welfare queen of this generation.

that scans resumes for key words that may have been omitted in an otherwise stellar application. It's screening by algorithm. Resumes that do make it past the software are read with a grain of salt, the assumption made that much of what is on them is embellished, given that the past couple of decades of popular resume-writing wisdom has coached such tactics at every turn. *Make Yourself Stand Out! Speak to the Traits Employers Need! Every Accomplishment Should Be Made Exceptional!* Implored at every turn to advertise ourselves, we've done it. Now, we treat each other the way we treat every other advertisement.

As a society, I suppose we should have seen this coming in the same way I should have realized what would happen each time we attempted to move to a new place and set up a new life. But it's not all grumpy gloom and disheartening ordeals. When I recall these events, this is what I remember thinking and feeling. I can bring back the emotional memories of what happened and feel it in my chest. I still wouldn't change the way we've done things. It's good to be slapped across the mouth with reality, rejected and taught that the world owes you nothing. Our adventures have at least highlighted that point. We adapt and change into people who end up with the mindset required to function as modern people must.

You know where this goes and what happened to Grand Junction. It is our pattern. I only wish that I hadn't managed to fall in love with the place before we said goodbye.

WP

It was early evening and I sat on a pile of cushions in what was left of the living room, marking time until I'd join Sabrina, asleep on the air mattress on the other side of the wall. Depending on the context, this is either a step up or down from what a person expects. For the people we thought we would be (campers) it's a dramatic step up from sleeping on the ground or on top of one of the always-inadequate-for-my-bony-hips foam pads that are so popular in the backcountry. For who we actually were (people on the eve of a move) this was a step down from our bed. Still beats camping on the floor.

The air mattress was the third inflatable object we'd purchased in the previous six months, all three of them obtained for outdoorsy, recreational reasons. The other two were inner tubes for floating down the Colorado River. These tubes were far

more luxurious than the old truck tire tubes I bought back in the 90's for about five bucks to float down the Lehigh River. It was then a simple matter of going to the local tire shop and asking for them, and I'm sure the guys at the shop pulled them out of the trash pile and subsequently spent the money on sodas.

Crude but effective, the truck tubes performed well even if they had a tendency to put a nasty rash in one's armpit from assuming the splayed inner-tuber's posture, paddling to stay pointed in the direction of the current. Our recent purchases had a net stretched taut across the opening where your butt goes to provide a sort of seat. There was even an inflatable backrest. Cup holders and handles adorned the outer ring for the people who just can't resist bringing a beverage when they float. So the tubes were nice. We used them once to float with our friends. They teamed up in a kayak while Sabrina and I bobbed along in our luxury rings and I tried very hard to keep from getting a horrible sun burn whilst exposed to the midday radiation of western Colorado summer.

The air mattress' job was to make my wife more comfortable on a camping trip that we were planning. The trip never actually happened, which is fine because Sabrina doesn't enjoy camping. The mattress gets plenty of use as a guest bed and it's a cinch to deflate and pack.

I was in a room full of boxes. We'd been preparing things for transportation all day and when we weren't doing that we were cleaning. The truck would be ready for loading the next morning. There was the familiar restlessness, the uncertainty activating the sympathetic nervous system. I always feel much better once we get on highway time, and the weight slips off my shoulders once we're unpacked at the other end. Until then, there's the transitional period of uneasiness to contend with.

Again, though, we'd been there before. Ten times before.

32. When I woke up in our Denver hotel room, I'd barely slept. We didn't go to bed particularly early. Having come through the mountains two days prior, we spent some time visiting friends and family on our way east.

It was March. The previous day, while enjoying coffee with Sabrina's sister Nicole at a Capitol Hill cafe, the wind picked up, forcing us to choose between moving inside or ingesting a fine layer of street dust atop our beverages. It was a warm, sunny day, bright enough to burn skin, but that wind was

a warning. I had spent the morning re-packing the moving truck, which had been hastily slapped together and looked a mess after only a couple hundred miles. Sabrina went off to visit her friend Erin while I carefully did my best to insert our belongings properly for the rest of the 1,600 mile trek. We visited Macole and made sure she was well. Our friend Aaron came with his lady to eat with us the night before.

I was up throughout the night on account of the howling wind and then, the driving rain. I awoke around four, thoughts of our impending drive across the plains keeping me awake. What was rain in Denver was likely to be something else once we left town. Sabrina and I bent ourselves into our vehicles and headed for I-70 eastbound, topping off fuel tanks on the way.

Not 20 miles outside the city, the rain turned to sideways snow. The wind remained relentless and unimpeded in its travel across the flat expanse of the high plains. It was still fairly warm for snow and the ground was wet, so we motored on, unable to see very far but on good pavement. The farther east we went, the worse things became. The vehicles began to leave tire tracks. The road progressively whitened. In the snowy gray darkness, the world seemed to flash green. Then, thunder. And again. The eerie and awesome novelty of lightning in the midst of a howling winter wind. We were driving across the path of a frozen thunderstorm and the road ahead was treacherous. There were spun out and wrecked cars littering the highway, true to form. We crept along at 30, then 20 miles per hour, the road becoming a single passable lane.

As dawn broke, we'd passed Limon, Colorado, headed for Burlington and the portmanteau-ed Kanorado on the border with Kansas. I had been listening to the weather warnings on the radio. The highway was closing. No cars were traveling west on the lanes across the median from us. On the eastbound side, no headlights or tail lights but ours. And we continued. For well over an hour, it was Sabrina's truck and me following closely behind in my little red car, slowly slipping along in a blinding storm, unable to see more than a quarter mile in any direction.

It had been minutes after we left Limon that the highway patrol closed the gates behind us. Everyone else would have to wait until the weather improved. Had my restlessness not awoken us both, we probably would've been stuck in eastern Colorado until the storm passed.

The thought struck me that the whole situation was a

metaphor for what we had been doing for several years, except now there were just the two of us. Macole used to be our companion and company, however involuntary or unwilling, on these relocation journeys. But we were alone on a hazardous path. No one was around to save us or savor the moment. Most people probably would have told us to stop. Exit. Turn around for safety's sake.

It just wasn't bad enough that we felt we should stop. Slow as we went, it was still fast enough to out-drive the storm. So, unadvisedly, we pressed on. Our very own highway. Closed gates could occasionally be seen with parked traffic behind them on the westbound side at on-ramps. Had we blown a tire or thrown a tie rod, slid off into a ditch, it would've been a very bad day. Somewhere near the Kansas border, the road began to clear and the snow was a little less sticky. Then it wasn't snow. Then it wasn't anything and we were zipping for St. Louis, two states away. A little luck and a lot of caution had seen us through yet another wintry adventure.

Pulling into a hotel just outside of our target city for the night, we had been on the road for 18 or 20 hours. It was near nine o'clock and we were exhausted. Tired enough that it barely mattered when the room had no hot water and the elevator rattled the floor. There was a hair on a bar of soap that may or may not have been ours. We were alive and there was a bed.

WP

The storm we'd outrun had caught up with us as we crossed Ohio and the northern panhandle of West Virginia, washing everything with spring rain. In this part of the country, the storms don't drop as much snow in spring.

West Virginia, wrinkled up from the relative flatness of Ohio, quickly turned into southwestern Pennsylvania after we passed Wheeling. Not long after, the roads became busier, bigger. The signs on I-376 warned of a steep grade and a tunnel ahead. The traffic slowed for the constriction of the bore, the Fort Pitt Tunnel. A long, slow passage through the tunnel was soon lit, and we emerged from the hillside into a vast, stunning panorama of the city of Pittsburgh, shocking the senses into realization that we'd arrived at our destination, a curtain lifted on our new stage. We immediately rolled out onto an enormous steel bridge, cousins of which could be seen in all directions, and

drove high above the Monongahela River. The Allegheny River could be seen meeting the Mon's waters to our north, where they became the Ohio River.⁴³ Another town with strong aquatic ties and a grand meeting between equally impressive waterways. Barges and tow boats could be seen, suggesting a healthy riverine commercial business. The skyscrapers of downtown were a stone's throw from the windshield.

We turned and made our way east along the north bank of the Monongahela, arriving at our apartment home in the evening. Unable to use the freight access door until morning, we chose to get a cheap hotel room in nearby Monroeville rather than try to locate and unpack what we'd need to wash ourselves and sleep in the empty unit. It had been a long trip. We left the moving van parked next to our building and made for the hotel, where we found a hot shower and a comfortable bed waiting for us.

WP

The next day, it became clear that we had rented another basement apartment but the building was built on a hill and it still had full windows to the outside in each of the two major rooms. Walking down the long hallway from the loading dock to our place revealed that most of the residents were older. The building was one of two and felt more like an old hotel. A symphony of smells pervaded the quiet halls: the slight odor of garbage coming from the trash chute area, roasting onions, fried food, something that smelled vaguely like seafood, and one or two other aromas that bespoke foreign culinary associations.

Our apartment was larger than expected and clean. The property manager had unexpectedly offered to install a washer and dryer in the unit for a small monthly premium and I exasperatedly stammered a yes into the phone, having never been made such a gracious offer by a landlord. Standing in a repurposed hall closet, the two appliances sat shiny and new, a touch of home that we were very happy to have. It wasn't even a full day of work to unpack everything and have it all in relative

43 Native naming conventions are everywhere in this part of the country. Just as two native names combine to form a very American name, there is an area railroad bridge (40.465486, -80.061082) still stenciled *PC&Y Ry.* for the Pittsburgh, Chartiers, and Youghioghenny Railway. An English, French, and Native American name for a very industrial business. It's a brain tickler.

order. We then made our way to the nearest grocery store.

Driving through the streets, we were noticing that not only was our apartment building on a hill, but everything in Pittsburgh seemed to have been crumpled into a ball and spread back out, the resulting folds, peaks, valleys not entirely leaving the landscape. I had long said to Sabrina that I didn't want to live anywhere flat and it appeared that the universe had heard my request and granted it with a flourish. One of the things I'd neglected to do before moving to Steel City was take a look at a topographic map. Winter driving and the simple act of riding my bike were now entirely new issues.

Penn Avenue in Wilkinsburg was interesting. On the neighborhood livability spectrum, it would fall somewhere between old-school Main Street, USA and crack house. Boarded up structures were everywhere, some of them clearly awaiting demolition, others just forgotten. Indeed, on subsequent trips, we would see the demolition in progress. There were plenty of people about, a good sign in a neighborhood like this (a good sign anywhere, really) but it was clearly a place that had seen better days.

In the coming weeks, as I searched for work with the many businesses that were offering it, we would find more places in similar states of disarray: working class areas that had been eviscerated by the shrinking of the steel business in the 1980s. Areas that still hadn't recovered 30-odd years later. As the steel industry relocated to places with cheaper labor and less restrictive environmental regulations, places with more abundant natural resources that were more easily available, it took thousands of blue collar jobs with it. By choosing to make steel in India, China, and Mexico among other places, the industry was cutting the lifeline to countless working class Pittsburgh (and not just Pittsburgh) families. This is the familiar origin story of the Rust Belt Town.

Houses fell into disrepair with no one to fix them. Parts of town seemed frozen in a late 80s or early 90s bubble, when everything had closed. Nobody was there to take care of it. Nobody was even there to vandalize it in some cases. It was like looking at pictures of Pripyat after Chernobyl, the primary difference being that Pittsburgh's economy was recovering. Jobs, opportunities, *people* were coming back to town. Google had a presence. Prestigious universities brought money and minds from the outside.

As we drove clean through Wilkinsburg and came out the other side in East Liberty, we could see evidence of the changes happening. Sketchy was replaced with trendy. Skateboarders were falling instead of bricks. The only frightening thing was the number of yuppies. Gentrification is a word snarled from the mouths of people in love with a neighborhood as it was, who don't believe that a bulldozer and some mixed-use buildings are the solutions we need. The problem is that places like Wilkinsburg and neighboring Homewood are in desperate need of a drastic change. The old neighborhood doesn't function anymore. The people, businesses, and surrounding city have all changed and left some of these places to rot.

While driving through the decay, I recalled the venom that Portland people spat when speaking of the urban growth boundary. I also remember that Portland had undergone a similar transformation from blue-collar lumbering town to a much more high-tech center for people who don't work in factories. Today, the city has nearly eliminated the urban cancers which plague many other places. It's true that high property values and an exorbitant cost of living has replaced affordable neighborhoods and displaced many of the workers to the cheaper suburbs. It's created a commuter culture in a city that is very opposed to driving to work. Rejuvenation comes at a price, but a person can feel the difference between a walk in Homewood and a walk through East Liberty. I agree that the wrecking ball shouldn't be the go-to choice, but sometimes it is absolutely necessary to tear down and start over again. You'd probably expect to hear that from a man who's made a profession of new beginnings.

Walking through the various neighborhoods and boroughs that make up the Pittsburgh area seemed to reveal that it was once just a loose collection of small communities. There's a township vernacular in Pittsburgh. Each little holler between the hills had its own main street. There were usually car dealerships, crappy fast food, and maybe a local greasy spoon. In places like Dormont and Mt. Lebanon on the west end of town, the main streets had kept their vitality and functionality, qualities shared by other area communities. Each one revealed that it was probably once an insular settlement of its own, perhaps most obviously displayed by the numerous local governments that stitch Allegheny County together. These have all grown up and grown together, socioeconomically if not physically. The

innermost communities closest to the meeting of the rivers, roughly, are called Pittsburgh. Surrounding areas get away with using the city's name on their addresses. We were technically living in Forest Hills, but the mail carriers still found it when we called it Pittsburgh.

My initial reactions to this brand new city were mixed. I enjoy a city that still has industrial roots. The smell of hydrogen sulfide from the nearby Edgar Thompson plant, part of US Steel's Mon Valley Works, frequently came into our apartment windows when the wind was right. It reminded me of walks in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, home of Bethlehem Steel, the skeleton of which has since been turned into a tourist attraction with a neighboring casino. Too big to tear down, too culturally important to gloss over. The great steel exodus of the 1980s hadn't completely eliminated the blast furnaces and rolling mills from the valleys of southwestern Pennsylvania.

A bike ride past Edgar Thompson revealed the fascinating facade of a truly heavy industry. The tracks of the Union Railroad threaded their way among the utilitarian, angular, begrimed buildings. That same ride confirmed for me that I wouldn't be taking my bike much of anywhere in Pittsburgh. Riding over the Braddock Hills to get to the mill was a grueling task. The typical relaxing enjoyment of letting my legs do the work that a car would normally perform was replaced by the burning breathlessness of a ride taken for cardiovascular improvement. I'm not against exercise, but the terrain greatly reduced my effective riding range.

When I eventually look back on making a life in Pittsburgh, there will be one thing sticking out above all others: being forced to drive pretty much everywhere. It was harder to find a place to rent in our usual sight-unseen way. The place we ended up with was a few miles further from things like grocery stores than we would have liked. When I did secure a job working with a railroad contractor in Wall, PA, I needed to drive there. I was very close to biking the seven-mile journey a couple days per week, but the final stretch of road to the place was two-lane blacktop with no shoulder over blind hills and equally sketchy curves. The local drivers' habit of squeezing 50 mph out of what was posted as 35 just made me throw up my hands and admit defeat.

In the meantime, Sabrina and I began to explore the area. We found a decent Indian food place in the quaint town of

Aspinwall, on the north bank of the Allegheny river. We spent time with Sabrina's brother-from-another-mother Landen, who lived in the North Shore neighborhood with a striking view of downtown. Walks around our Forest Hills neighborhood revealed a place of springtime beauty rivaling that of Portland.

I had no idea Pennsylvania was so pretty. I'd grown up in the state and couldn't really tell you about the trees and plants of the place. I spent a couple years as a cub scout,⁴⁴ so I was aware that there were oaks, birches, beeches, and maples. I could identify and eat raspberries, wild onion, mint, and honeysuckle. I knew the fall colors would be lovely. Even so, perhaps it was just the western part of the state that was this way.

Nope.

A visit to Hokendaqua for my nephew's graduation displayed the beauty that I'd grown up with. One of the advantages of our new Keystone State residence was that it was approximately the same distance from my family as we had been from Macole in Grand Junction. The mountain crossing was just different. Lower, to be precise. The Alleghenies are lovely, but barely qualify as mountains if you're accustomed to jagged peaks above treeline and highways that have snow on them in May. The driving was easy, allowing us to visit with my kin and become very aware that the things we notice as young adults and children are not the same as those we see as mature people.

Also in close proximity to our new home: Washington, D.C. Sabrina had never been to the capital, a confession that caused me to pause and suggest that we plan a trip immediately, which we did, and found ourselves there on a lovely spring weekend. This would also be a first for me, having always visited the city with parents or teachers. Being able to walk around wherever the damn we pleased was a chance to see the parts of the place that were further from the tourist-laden National Mall. Although we did spend quite a bit of time there too, we ventured into the surrounding neighborhoods. We walked among iconic brick townhomes that form a very distinctive

44 Reluctant years. One time I disassembled a nine-volt battery, which had a bunch of smaller cells inside it. Deciding that they looked a little like bullets, I told one of my fellow scouts that's what they were. He either tattled on me or just blabbed it, but one of the scout leaders approached me about the "live rounds" I was carrying. I showed them to him, telling him it was a battery, and he confiscated them for good measure. Between people like that and the "Winter Adventure" camping trips, it wasn't my cup of cocoa.

character I've not seen in other American cities. We ate in Chinatown. We saw people from more walks of life than I have ever seen, many of whom were also on vacation. I've never heard so many different languages spoken, and while sharing some shade next to a reflecting pool with eastern European people, I was very happy to realize that I had no idea what they were talking about.

The city was awash with spring. We were visiting during the tail end of what should have been cherry blossom season, although after noticing a distinct lack of their picturesque pinkness, a website confirmed that the blossoms had peaked about one month earlier due to a particularly warm and early season. No matter, as most of the tulips were still blooming along with many of the other trees, accentuating the warm, subtropical weather.

Later, we were on our way to view the Jefferson Memorial and the police began to block roads. Sabrina quickly pegged the cause: a motorcade was coming. It was Sunday and Donald Trump was returning from Florida. By the time we were next to the Memorial, the armored cars came into view with a full complement of emergency vehicles. I rendered the appropriate middle finger salute and Mr. Jefferson looked on, unmoved.

Returning from our trip, we realized that Canada was also pretty close to Pittsburgh. Driving nearly straight north would take us into Buffalo and the border. We had purchased passports back in 2011, during our first move to Portland, after realizing that we could take a train to Vancouver B.C. Fast forward six years and those passports still hadn't been outside the confines of our country or done anything more exotic than verifying identity to set up employment or ensuring fitness for airline conveyance to security officers. We dusted off our papers and set out one weekend to make the trip.

The rolling country of our part of PA gave way to less undulating terrain as we approached Lake Erie. Turning right at the city of the same name we could see the lake to our left, which might as well have been an ocean. No far shore was visible and waves were being whipped white by the winds which don't stop for long on the lakes. Approaching New York, the land filled up with vineyards. Since leaving the Grand Valley wine country, we'd been forced to consume the alcohol that had been approved for sale by Pennsylvania's somewhat archaic liquor

laws in their state-run stores. Every store had the same varieties of wine, many of them uninspiring. New York was a little different, and in proximity to the state line, people were taking advantage. The entire region is actually quite renowned for good wine growing, on account of the unique characteristics of its soil. These characteristics remain somewhat of a mystery. Sabrina's the wine snob and I'm learning, but the viticultural arts still escape me. Something to do with glaciation or depth of bedrock or Dionysus having slept there.

We crossed into Canada, asking if we could get our passports stamped. The border agent said yes and then forgot to do it before handing us our papers and sending us on our way. Ah, well, it was almost perfect.

33. Niagara Falls, Ontario, 1700 hours. Standing on the banks of the Niagara River, I was suddenly surprised. The earth was shaking. I'd found a spot about 1,000 feet upstream of the Canadian Horseshoe Falls, or what most people just call Niagara Falls. The majority of the water from the river goes this way, with a smaller share of it falling on the American side of the river over the synonymously-named American Falls and its smaller cousin, the Bridal Veil Falls.

By coincidence, our hotel looked out at the portion of the river next to which I stood. Coincidental, since the room just happened to be the least expensive option that also put us in walking distance of the main attraction. Arriving in the room the day before and looking at this tumultuous turquoise torrent put the idea in my head to figure out a way to come have a closer look, and there I stood. On shaking ground.

It had probably been 30 years since my last visit to Canada and Sabrina had never been. She elected to stay behind for this little walk, having been out strolling through Niagara-on-the-Lake some 20 miles downstream tasting wine all day, and we took a look at the falls on the evening we arrived. Throngs of tourists are not something that unwinds her. Nor me, actually, but I care not: the river is an absolute *force*.

I didn't expect to be so captivated by the Niagara. I probably would have merely thought it beautiful had I not stood next to it, felt the vibration of millions of cubic feet of water roaring toward the precipice and then dashing itself to vapor on boulders seen and unseen in the gorge below. The inescapable feeling of unimaginable power was in my very bones. Three

steps forward would've taken me into a current that would inexorably take me to the other side. So I just stood, stared, and contemplated my own frailty while watching the implacable water rolling over some of the man-made structures that line the river to provide hydroelectricity to the region. Or at least, I suspected that's what they did.

Some of the structures definitely go toward electricity production, and enough water can be diverted to that purpose that there is an agreement in place over just how much goes to the power turbines, lest they divert so much that the spectacle of the falls is reduced to just kind-of-awesome. The gist is that when tourists' eyes are most likely to be upon the falls, there will be enough water to put on a good show. So much for being an unstoppable thing, I suppose.

As I walked downstream, I couldn't resist stopping at every little opening in the trees to look at the river. Full disclosure: high water, especially fast-moving, murky water, freaks me out. I have no idea where this comes from, although as a toddler I was messing around on a bridge over a small creek, slipped under the bottom rail, and landed in a few inches of water flat on my back as my mother watched in horror. Screaming but unhurt, she pulled me back out. Perhaps that left an imprint, but I have no memory of the event. It might just be that I watched *The Weather Channel* enough to see hundreds of cars, people, and buildings being swept away by flood waters. I might have a little cat in me. Whatever, there were signs on the banks warning me that if I got too close, I might not be coming back out of the water. Signs were there, but mercifully no fences. This gave me an unobstructed path to the hydrologic annihilator before me.

I began to receive the Niagara's blessing as I walked closer to the brink. Water vapor from the enormous plume blew over me, giving everything in the area the sensation of being in wintertime Seattle. It is ostensibly raining next to the falls, every day, most of the time. Along the path and closer still to the big drop, I stepped out onto a causeway in front of yet another structure related to power production, according to the lettering upon the building. The causeway was set into the course of the river a bit, water all around me, which didn't feel dangerous, but it did stimulate that primal part of my brain warning me that I might need to escape from a monster in a hurry. A nesting goose was seen, obviously incubating an egg, on the top of one of the

support piers below me. I have no idea how the animal decided on a spot 500 feet from an enormous waterfall, next to a roiling river, six feet from a stream of tourists, but there it was.

One thing that was visible from the hotel room were flocks of birds, circling the water. They were large and white, so I assumed seagulls. Out on the causeway, closer inspection showed that while they might've been gulls, they were a special breed. I first noticed when I watched one dive beak-first into the crest of a small waterfall, created as part of the hydroelectric facility, and then somehow make it back out of the current. The birds were fishing. They were beautiful white and black animals with the tail of a swallow. They circled the point just where the water comes over the top of the dam, I assume because that's the easiest place to look into the water and see some food beneath the surface. When they had their mark they shot into the water. Many times they came back out with small fish in their beaks.

Several things were in this part of the river, with the aforementioned hydro power structures being one and something that I recognized as a shipwreck being another. A shoreside plaque explained that this was the Niagara Scow, dating to an incident in 1918 when a flat-bottomed cargo vessel broke free from its tugboat and headed where all things in this part of the river go. There were two men aboard who found themselves caught on the rocks maybe half a mile from the edge. They were out there the better part of a day before being rescued from shore by people firing grapple guns at the wreck and using the rope as a lifeline. I'm not sure if my splash in the creek as a child left a mark, but I'm pretty sure *this* would have done it had I been one of the unfortunate sailors.

Another thing: there were several islands in the river impossibly close to the edge of the falls, used by the innumerable birds to rest during their time spent patrolling the waters. Trees and plants grew on what can only be described as a perfectly placed refuge. Thus, it was possible to witness one of the most awesome displays of water power about 10 feet from a sea bird standing serenely on one leg, enjoying a food coma.

My slow walk toward the falls continued, the "rain" falling in waves as the wind moved the mist around. The pathway became wider with a substantial barrier, fully wet and packed with people just like me, who couldn't really believe what they were seeing. That day, many of them were Asian tourists but there seemed to be people from all parts of the globe,

judging by the symphony of languages. I slid into whatever gaps in the railing I could find for unimpeded views of Niagara Falls, within jumping distance of my face. Again, I discover captivation while watching the water slip over the brink. Using the technique of the fishing birds, I could see that the water was probably only four or five feet deep right at the edge, and moving at a pretty good clip. Its turquoise color was very obvious, and I could see moss growing on the rocks under all that fast moving water, probably owing to the fact that light can penetrate relatively shallow water to support photosynthesis. It's like discovering that something lives in the boiling water near an ocean vent, really. I don't want to be too pithy, but life can be surprising.

As I meandered downstream of the falls, I peered over the edge into the 200-foot chasm that the falls has carved through the centuries. I noticed a sea gull gently gliding near the gorge, and then suddenly it was lifted rapidly, shooting into the sky a good 100 feet higher than it was the moment before. As I looked over the railing, I was blasted full in the face with the cause of the gull's ascent. It may have been December in Seattle nearby, but it was the Scottish Highlands right in my chops. Cold, wet, and thrashed by wind, the rocks below were all blanketed in green, low-profile plants that enjoy this sort of thing. Across the river, on a rocky slope between the Bridal Veil Falls and the Horseshoe Falls, were hundreds of birds. This might actually have been a nesting ground, judging from their behavior. It could've also been just another convenient resting place for the winged creatures riding updrafts all day. An ornithologist I am not.

On downstream I walked, dodging selfie sticks and family groups. The American Falls wasn't far, on the other side of the river, a straight-edged counterpoint to the curvaceousness of the Horseshoe. The American Falls features many more visible rocks. Huge boulders and stacks of debris undoubtedly released by the erosive force of the water were in clear view. A walkway that I remember from my first visit to this place was visible, where people can pay a fee to don some rain gear and walk through the spray of the Bridal Veil Falls. The air was still a little cool to see hordes of people lining up for a drenching. There were plenty of folks filling the decks of the powerful ferry boats that give nearly the same experience by motoring up to near the base of the Horseshoe Falls, fighting the current to allow

people to get some water on their eyeglasses. All this was here 30 years ago.

The Strip was not. I was quite young at the time of my first visit, but I do remember a few odd attractions near the falls even then. I recall being excited about one in particular, that put you in a futuristic looking pod and sent you over the falls. Or at least that's what I thought until I arrived, surprised to find that it was just a streamlined TV room on pneumatic rams that simulated the sights and motions. I could've found it at the mall back home. Today, there are towering hotels built to offer a view of the place, one of which we were staying in. Sabrina instantly referred to the area as The Strip, bearing as it does a suspicious resemblance to the neon-encrusted fervor of Vegas. Smaller by far, but the feeling is still apparent, with tour buses lining the sidewalks, casinos in evidence on both sides of the river, loud music blaring from speakers at some places with live music blaring from others, and a general sense of being invaded by obnoxious Americana.

It strikes me that when U.S. citizens travel, they mostly just want all the comforts of home with different scenery. This is partially charming, if easy to hate. A love for the comforts of home is certainly no reason to get vexed. It just seems that it goes a little too far in places like this, crossing the line from accommodating to tacky.

One needs to walk only about three blocks to arrive in the “real” town of Niagara Falls, Ontario, much more sedate and tolerable than the bustle of Casino de Agua. It was out away from The Strip that we had breakfast, since that was one of the only places we could find something like reasonable breakfast that didn't feature packaging with cartoon characters or the likelihood of extreme indigestion. It was in the small establishment that our server tipped us off to the existence of Niagara-on-the-Lake, after hearing our lamentations on the state of the city. I suppose it's just a common fate of North American border towns and perhaps *any* border town. The cultural cross-pollination sometimes ends up producing some bizarre hybrids. Not all of them are palatable.

My walk downstream continued, and as I looked away from the river I was surprised by a monument to Nikola Tesla, himself a wonderful hybrid of Serbian and American cultures. My confusion gave way to understanding as I read the plaques describing the man's work with hydroelectricity and his role in

consulting with those who would eventually figure out how to harness the power of the falls. A well-made statue depicts Tesla atop an alternator. I walked away satisfied both that I've learned something and that it would be hard to find a more appropriate tribute.

My adult impression of Canada is that it's like the U.S., but *off*. Or vice versa. I love the little differences. I used the metric portion of Lumpy's speedometer for the first time, ever. The Canadian dialect was in evidence everywhere among the dozens of other world languages being spoken. And those Great Lakes. The Niagara River is really just a conduit for water going from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. The oceanic beauty of the freshwater is captivating. The waves are the only real giveaway that they are lakes, being both smaller and more frequent than the pulsing undulations of the sea, but the vast expanses of water are natural wonders by themselves. So we went home, charmed by our northern neighbor, saddened by the need to leave and happy to have been able to visit.

34. Back in Pittsburgh, we were heading home from what can only be described as a lackluster lunch, featuring one restaurant's interpretation of Indian food. The journey to find an eatery that serves a consistently delicious rendition of this cuisine is one we've undertaken before and it's usually worth the effort. The city doesn't seem to be able to produce a cup of chai tea that tastes like anything more than brown water with some cinnamon thrown in. Not the biggest of problems, but morale wasn't high. In my experience, discussing *anything* in the context of recently-consumed, underwhelming food is a bad idea. Like so many of these excursions, though, we ignored that fact and talked about things anyway.

We'd been living in Pittsburgh for about a month, long enough that a distinctive feel for the city was becoming apparent. We discussed some of the traits as we walked to the car. The drivers are awful. Worse than Denver. Worse even than Portland, which features hordes of California drivers, who are probably only second to Long Island drivers in the Asshole Olympics of Motor Vehicle Operation. Now, I recognize that any person who regularly criticizes the driving abilities of *everyone* else is probably a poor driver who doesn't turn the magnifying glass inward. That aside, I've never seen more frequent use of the horn to say everything from "Hi!" to "Go die in a fire!". Speeding and

tailgating, the twin scourges of American motorways, are in constant evidence. There are actually roadside signs that say, “Don’t Tailgate”. They don’t work. If I’m not being tailgated, it’s because the person behind me is soaking up all of the rear-bumper attention by also driving at a reasonable speed. Pittsburghers don’t seem to understand that tailgating doesn’t allow for people to change lanes or merge, which very often results in traffic back-ups at places like highway on-ramps. People are very possessive of the space in front of them, which is curious, because they always seem to want to fill it with someone else’s car. When I didn’t stop for a jaywalking pedestrian, she called me a bitch. When I used my horn to notify the driver who pulled out in front of me that I needed to brake pretty hard to avoid hitting him, he cursed me out. These were both incidents in Wilkinsburg, which is kind of a write-off anyway, but the walkers in town also seem to have a no-rules-apply attitude. It’s just east-coast aggression, of the same type that’s been translated into really good hardcore and metal music over the years. The music I can handle. The everyday alpha driver and chip-bearing pedestrian are both seriously irritating.

Riding my bicycle in town was an effort in calculated risk. The aforementioned drivers doing, and I’m not joking, 20 miles per hour over the limit on otherwise quiet streets were a little alarming. It would be one thing if they did this and were actually *good* at it. But they weave, change lanes without looking, turn signals a mere illusion in their caffeine-addled brains. Looking into the cars of these speeding children reveals the same tendencies toward distraction displayed by your average teenager: radio dials, phones, GPS, food, and an above-average amount of people trying to manage a lit cigarette in addition to all the rest of it while behind the wheel. I could feel the slam of fast metal as it tucks my rear wheel, the thud of bone on windscreen, and see the stupid look on a driver’s face as I lay bleeding in the gutter and he explains to the officer (assuming he even bothers to stop), “Oh, I just didn’t see him! He was practically invisible!”, and his still-active GPS announces the next right turn from the open door of the car as the phone in his hand vibrates from the still-ongoing text conversation he’s been having since he left Starbucks 45 minutes ago. I’m not being facetious here; this crap is common, and a *very* real threat to

everyone trying to use a road.⁴⁵ Drivers in Pittsburgh already don't want to share the road with other cars, let alone me on my two wheels. If that wasn't bad enough, the town is built on hills. Not the little rolling ones, but the steep, you-can-almost-sled-down-them-on-wet-pavement kind. So the cycling had become less frequent since our arrival, and what little I had done felt more like an endurance test than the pleasing activity I crave.

The neighborhoods alternated from deteriorating and slightly frightening to stunningly beautiful, and most of them were affordable. Our Forest Hills neighborhood especially had some lovely areas with towering oak trees lining streets dotted with brick homes of very distinguished grace. The timeless brick home is Pittsburgh's housing vernacular and it features them with both abundance and excellence, all for half to one-third the price of markets in Denver and Portland.

So there's good and bad, just like everywhere else. This sort of thing happens every time we move. Once the honeymoon phase is over, we pick apart our current city of residence. Usually this happens about one month after we arrive, so we were right on schedule with Pittsburgh. It's as if we're arming ourselves with reasons that will validate our future decision to move again, should that become a reality. I'm not going to say that it's become easier for us to leave than it is for us to stay, but we definitely have become adept at the process of relocating, for what it's worth.

We both missed Grand Junction, where there was great Indian food and almost no traffic. I missed the level, wide streets and drivers who were a bit more aware of what's going on around them, or at least the wider streets and fewer cars made their transgressions less hazardous. There were jobs in Pittsburgh, jobs I could do. Jobs Sabrina could do should she need to find one. On it goes like this, the questioning of our motivations for leaving, of our choice to seek out greener pastures. We know the new place won't be better on all counts. We're not even looking for the perfect place; just the best combination of advantages and disadvantages. The job situation

45 I'll go on. The casual, flippant manner in which drivers are willing to put not just themselves, but mainly everyone around them in danger by using phones (and all the rest of it) makes me want to sandpaper the skin off their ignorant faces and mist them with hydrochloric acid until I believe that their pain matches my anger. There, I've said it. I'm really a nice guy once you get to know me.

might need to give. It might be the weather that needs a compromise, or maybe we'll need to put up with all the damned cars on the road. We're picky, but we know what we like. I will not pretend that we're victims of poor urban planning or a lackluster economy, although both of those things have sent ripples into our little tide pool. We made these decisions with open eyes and the stress I feel when we're running out of resources is mostly of our own creation. I haven't always been cool-headed about it either, picking at Sabrina and Macole, seeing hostility or irritation where there was only fatigue and dissatisfaction.

I want so much for there to be a fixed place in the world for us. I want to stop the rambling, stop the moving, and be able to get rid of most of the boxes that currently fill our apartment's storage unit, waiting for the next time we will fill them with our lives and carry them to a truck. Because there *will* be a next time. Where we are is not where we're going to stay. We might be in the correct neighborhood, but we're not at the correct address.

Sometimes it feels like we're playing Battleship, blindly marking coordinates. We get a hit, then move in the wrong direction. Meanwhile, big colored markers are showing up on our resources, threatening to take them away, our time running short. When we finally dial in our shots, we find that we've eliminated the PT boat, as the carrier floats defiantly nearby.

35. It was a sultry July day when I noticed them. I was finishing a shift at the railroad yard, tired, covered in dirt and sweat. The twilight was fading fast. Driving through the small town of Wall, I saw a girl with a jar, just standing and looking at a patch of grass. *Fireflies*. Their flashes were different than I remembered but there's no mistaking what they were. It had been 20 years since I'd seen them. Back then they were just a part of the summer evening tableau. That evening in Wall they were pure magic.

The forests beside the road home were blanketed with specks of flickering flylight, making it hard to concentrate on the driving. Proudly exclaiming to my wife what I'd seen the next day, we made it a point one night to observe them. Near dark, we pulled the blinds back in our bedroom and laid upon the bed looking out at the small woodland meadow that lay just outside the window. We'd seen a mother rabbit and her little bunny in spring. Then mother left and we watched Tiny Baby Bunny grow

up and move on. Woodchucks visited. A doe spent a couple days in the meadow licking her wounds after being throttled by one of the cars racing up the nearby on-ramp.

We just stared at the blackening vegetation until the blinking began. Tiny sparks of blue-green light, flashing more quickly than I remembered. I had anxiously awaited this day since moving to Savannah and expecting to see them. Where Georgia let us down, Pennsylvania provided. Soon there were dozens of the tiny creatures advertising themselves for mating outside our window. Such a small, quiet change to have such a profound impact.

We weren't entirely settled in Pittsburgh yet. I relished the weather, drinking up the warm and cloudy summer days with relish. It seems that part of my attraction to the cloudy Pacific Northwest was probably born from growing up in a place where the sun isn't the oppressive illuminator of Colorado. The dense greenery, the songs of locusts in August, it all seems to have encoded itself into my memories and the way I process seasons. I know these markers instantly. The smell of honeysuckle is a time of year.

I was happy to be working in a well-paid position that paid into Railroad Retirement again. Sabrina was happy to be near Landen and the eastern locations she'd never seen before. While this region is old and familiar to me, it was a frontier for her, new and unfamiliar, exotic in its rhythms and expressions. There is culture and adventure. Grand hotels to see, decaying steel mills to explore. Autumn would soon blanket the trees in a riot of color and fragrance. The winter promised to be formidable and challenging. There were plenty of reasons to stay.

But sitting atop a spare desk in our Pittsburgh apartment was a small jar. Soils from the Grand Mesa, Colorado National Monument, the bookcliffs, and our Grand Junction backyard had been faithfully collected and stored there. Immediately to its left, a piece of pottery made by one of Sabrina's fellow yogis, also fired with soil from those lovely Palisade cliffs. They sat as reminders that we were cursed people, a bit superstitious perhaps, trying to ignore the call of the road.

PARTING GIFTS

This is a story that continues to be written. Which makes sense, as its subjects aren't yet dead.

After Pittsburgh, there was Grand Junction again. I found work and stayed there for nearly 3 years before getting antsy. Sabrina found many jobs and the restlessness hadn't really left her either. Landen stopped to assist a stranded motorist on the shoulder of 376 in Pittsburgh and then died with him when they were struck by one of the inattentive drivers I've ranted about. Macole became the mother of twins. Our marriage almost didn't survive. Then the pandemic hit.

Just 10 miles north of Junction, the Pine Gulch fire unseated the Hayman Fire as the largest in Colorado history. 140,000 acres lost to lightning, its ashen remnants blanketing the town for a few days in August, a choking haze of smoke blotting out the Bookcliffs, and any other vistas, for weeks on end. I now carry lung-memory of both, and vividly remember the eerie sight of flames illuminating the underside of roiling smoke, desert mountains impersonating volcanoes. Smoke so thick and abundant that it made its own thunderstorm: pyrocumulus.⁴⁶ 2020 had been brutal, though not nearly as brutal to us as it had been for some.

I found myself staring out the window on a crisp, sunny morning, mid-week in late September. Cottonwoods wearing their gold and rabbitbrush doing its best to make the understory match. The red and rusty groundcovers, seed heads swaying in the sun. A lovely day for a drive. It was another railroad job, in Seattle, a city whose mayor conceded a portion of the town to protestors for a little while in an effort to acknowledge their pain and anger after we lost an astonishing number of people to police violence. My boss lost her son when a park ranger shot him during a traffic stop in New Mexico. That was all on film. So many people gunned down on film that year, and Seattle was fed up.

So we went to Denver because my pre-employment evaluations couldn't be done in Grand Junction, for some reason, another reminder of the sometimes inconvenient and sometimes

46 The Pine Gulch fire would slip to fourth place in the ensuing months, surpassed in size by the Cameron Peak (208,913 acres), East Troublesome (193,812 acres), and Mullen (176,878) fires. As of this writing in late November, three quarters of those fires were still not completely contained.

stark differences between the more-rural and the more-urban. It wasn't the first time I went to extreme lengths to travel for the railroad. Through Glenwood Canyon, now with a blackened north wall, redecorated by the Grizzly Creek fire, just another box ticked on the very long list of fires. 32,431 acres so far, human caused. It started right next to the highway, probably a cigarette butt or exhaust spark. Brown leaves. Seared trunks. Thermal defoliation. Fragrance of a campfire ring.

We drove further, enjoying what was left of the aspen leaves, though it looked like Colors Week was right on time, having been celebrated last weekend in the half-hearted way of all celebrations occurring amid virulent disease. Still beautiful, but the high season of autumnal beauty doesn't last in places like Vail, where the cold winds and early frosts quickly remove what the trees labor all year to produce.

Further still, and big electronic billboards pleaded with us to stop calling emergency hotlines about the smoke. The Williams Fork fire. Another 14,833 acres and counting, though who was really counting anymore? I rolled up the windows and set the vents to recirculate, hoping my cabin filter would take out the particulates and save us from a stuffy, snotty trip to the physical therapy clinic in Lakewood.

So I had my appointment and Sabrina took us back. It was lucky that she was able to get out of watching the grandkids to do the driving and keep me company. I did my reps on a machine so the railroad could determine if my knees and shoulders were healthy enough to work at the intermodal facility in the Queen City of the Northwest. A 13-hour day.

I hear you asking.

Because I miss it. I love the work. I think. The pandemic has tanked the economy and railroads are furloughed deep, leading to very soft hiring of train crews, but train crews aren't the only people who work for railroads. I loved my intermodal work in Pittsburgh. When BNSF opened a similar job in Seattle, they inexplicably, unpredictably expressed interest in bringing me back for a *third* try. I'd do it 100 times, if I'm honest, and maybe this is my pattern: do it, love it, start to hate it, do something else, and come back.

This of course has issues:

- Will we be able to afford to live in ultra-high-rent Seattle?
- Will my marriage survive?
- Will Macole be okay?
- How good is my rain gear?

What I can tell you is that I'm sick of living in a town with limited cultural events, a town that would rather protest taxes and mask-wearing than police violence and inadequate healthcare. I love the clean(er) air, the beautiful mesas and mountains (when I can see them), the crickets at night, the lack of traffic. We've even been in a lovely small house for over 2 years that's been great to personalize. I bought a push-reel mower and actually enjoyed shoving it over the small front lawn. The back garden is compact and manageable.

For all that, Grand Junction is not my Forever Town. Maybe I'm a city boy. Maybe it doesn't matter so long as I can slip into a pair of pinstriped bibs and play with trains. Sabrina might deny it, but it seems like I've always pulled us back to the Pacific Northwest, unable and unwilling to escape its allure. My center of gravity is up there and hers is in Colorado. We enter into these odd, binary-star-system orbits about these points, trapped for awhile, then flung across space to catch the other. We circle again until the instability flings us on into the black for another go-round. It's insane, scary, exciting, and difficult to explain.

All I know is that Seattle is essentially next to the ocean, with nowhere West left to go.

