



WE ALWAYS HAD NIXON

Broadside printing, historically employed for advertisement and ephemera, pounded onto walls and handed out in the street, is now used primarily by writers and poets to publicize their work in single sheet samples. The enclosed set of broadsides were digitally printed and individually numbered.

GEOMETRY

It was never hard to hitch a ride, even from Minneapolis to Duluth and back again like my friends did. I got started on a winter night at Hennepin and 22nd waiting for the bus. The winds kicked me around the way they did then and still do, reminding me of my insignificance in a raging universe. I reached out my arm, thrust forth my thumb and a rusty van stopped almost immediately. The driver happened to be going my way and knew the commune in Duluth where I had friends. We had a grand time riding to the university campus. To hell with the bus, I decided, expensive, slow, perpetually late and dirty.

Hennepin and 22nd became my spot, and it was perfect, just two blocks before the freeway entrance with an extra lane, a stoplight and a bus bench. Getting a ride home took more effort. With the university traffic and students crisscrossing streets all over, I had to develop a certain assertiveness and accept whatever came my way.

One afternoon a VW Bug, stripped down to only a driver's seat inside, swerved to the curb to pick me up, the driver not seeming to notice how I had to prop myself against the passenger door to keep my feet from hanging out of the car's bottom and dragging along the road. I was dressed for student teaching. I wore navy polka dots and a white collar, and made conversation pretending all was well down there on the busted floor. The driver was on top of the world with this vehicle that actually ran and didn't take up too much space on the planet. Bucky would approve. He loved Bucky Fuller. Had I ever seen a geodesic dome? Did I know it used a whole new math, a geometry for the ages? God was a verb, that's what Bucky said. Yeah, Bucky was the man. We rode on like clowns, air blowing in from every direction, shouting at one another to be heard.

But there were darker rides too, which should have warned me off. Drivers with porn taped to the dash. Loose hands, that sort of thing. And it did give me pause. One ride picked me up at my spot on Hennepin, made small talk until he roared onto the freeway, then unzipped his pants and went at it for five minutes or more. What's the matter with you, I yelled, sitting in my borrowed seat, bumming a ride, my knit poncho wrapped around. What's the matter with you? When he was done, he pulled out a Winston, offered me one in fact, and started complaining about President Nixon. We always had Nixon in those days. We could haul him out in any situation.

Hitchhiking might have been dangerous for someone like me, but almost every ride was some kind of adventure. People chattered away, maybe with a kid or two in the back seat or a sales partner and both of them dressed in new, cheap suits ready to conquer the weekly numbers. There were fanatics like the Bucky follower or vegetarians ready to tell you the horrors of meat or the woebegone students wanting to drop out after buying all those books and for what, they'd ask me. For what?

I never hitchhiked out of town and at the end of that college year, I graduated, got a job and started driving my own car, a barebones bright blue little Ford. I never picked up hitchhikers. That whole angle had changed and I had to find my adventures somewhere else. Owning a car was a new geometry.

But it was lonelier too. Now we say it's a different world and we'd never want anyone we loved, especially our young daughters, out on Hennepin Avenue thumbing for a ride. It's appalling to even think it. But I did it happily then. Not bravely or foolishly, but happily. And then I didn't. And then nobody really did. Which is how time alters and the roads travel and the line of life moves on and on.

BYE BYE LOVE

My roommate painted a FUCK COMMUNISM poster and taped it up over the bathroom mirror. She said it was a neutral statement, one word canceled the other. She used red, white and blue paint for the bubble letters and added stripes like the flag. Then she invited over some guys from the air base, all trim and tucked into their beige uniforms, ready to be somebody, terrified at where the war would take them on the road to being somebody. We were white girls from an isolated mining town. They were black guys from everywhere – New Jersey, Mississippi, Florida.

We made them cornbread and drenched it in honey we bought at a local commune. They brought their own beer and histories. Tried to be gentlemen. One guy named Jackson didn't want to like me so much because he had a girl back home. He thought honor mattered and called me Little One, even though I was older and, in some manner, wiser. I got the devil on one shoulder saying do it, Jackson, he'd say. Then I got an angel on the other shoulder saying Jackson, you be good now. I knew the angel would win. And I had little interest really in the devil on his other shoulder. He seemed more like a kid brother full of questions and dreams.

He loved his Bible. He also loved his clothes. Tall and lean, loose and artful, Jackson knew how to pair a bright red shirt with white pants and a Panama hat so that you'd want to take his picture. He had lots of clothes. Fashionable, well-made clothes. My roommate and I wore leftovers from high school and jeans we bought at Rag Stock. Not Jackson. Jackson had a wardrobe.

But the Bible told him to give away his worldly possessions and so he did. Took all those fine clothes with sewed in labels down to the park to give to the homeless. The bums weren't thankful though. Jackson scared them half to death, this young black man with an accent saying Take them, they yours, man. So Jackson left his offerings right there on the park benches. Hundreds of dollars of mostly new and wholly beautiful clothes. It was another in life's mysteries to him. They ran away, he said, not understanding how a gift cannot be a gift. How his generosity, and God's for that matter, could be so foiled.

His buddies laughed. They weren't as elegant or unsuspecting. They didn't have angels on their shoulders. One named Edward spent the night often, comfy in my roommate's twin bed until dawn, when he'd have to hightail it back to the base. He decided to call me Little One too, but Edward was a very big guy, so it probably made sense.

Even so, I did my exercises just before the lights went out, working on my waistline that nobody could see under my hand-me-down sweaters. I'm through with romance, I'm through with love. I'm through with counting the stars above. I kept it up for twenty minutes every night. Good night, Little One, Edward would say as soon as the Everly Brothers and I were quiet. Good night, Edward, I'd call from my twin bed across the room.

I left town before the guys shipped out. My roommate eventually married one of them, but it didn't last. They were never a neutral statement, never an easy match. They met, married and divorced before the war was even over.

I don't know who lived or died. Jackson is still eighteen in this story. My roommate still lets her breasts hang free and her hair frizz fat. Down the steep hill the foghorn moans as it did, the bridge lifts, the ore boats coast through. Someone is coming from somewhere. Or going. That's one fact that does not change.

BUCKETS OF RAIN

My best friend thought her mother was a witch. Not a mean witch, but a psychic, knowing witch, with creamy skin and a wide red mouth. I don't remember what her mother foretold or knew, but she had an unwavering gaze as though she might be seeing something more than the rest of us. She was gracious and had known my own mother in school, when they were both shy and pretty. My friend's mother had blue eyes you could drown in. My friend did too.

We met young, when girls wore dresses to school, with nylons and garters of some kind to hold them up. We recognized one another just as our mothers had those years before, but we were not all that shy, only awkward. That's what we saw in each other. We both groped our way along and knew poems and still loved our dolls with all their outfits. We lit candles at midnight to send messages across town, like witches, except that we weren't. Though there was always that leaning toward another world or dimension, a place of stars that told stories. We were earth signs. No wonder, we'd say. No wonder we know everything. The earth spoke to us. And we were young.

But we did stay best friends into the next decade, which was everything then. We were still awkward in our ways and groping into our twenties and chain smoking our Marlboros and raising just one eyebrow at each other to say it all. She was beautiful, but only a small part of her cared. Most of her wanted to make a name, the way her mother could never foresee.

And she had gifts, the old kind that go unnoticed, like typing 140 words a minute and playing piano tunes from memory. That's where she got a niche, playing piano tunes and singing in little bars upstairs of bigger bars, with a loyal following that loved her beautiful face and outrageous comments. You couldn't predict. You couldn't foretell. But we'd all laugh, her loyal following of men who stayed in love with her and misfits who liked her sass and bartenders who served her whiskey every hour when she took a break. And me. I was there too. Almost beautiful myself by then and ready to roll on the tunes she played. Buckets of rain, buckets of tears, got them buckets coming out of my ears.

A few times we visited the state penitentiary together, where on select Friday afternoons singers and writers shuffled through the many locked metal doors to sit on a stage and be artful, read bits from plays, sing Dylan songs, share diary entries. Only a few of those guys cared if we were beautiful or almost beautiful. They wanted to be heard. Tell their tales. Be redeemed. Our escort into this world was a middle-aged social worker with at least fifteen strands of beads, rocks and teeth hanging around his neck, a man so large and foreboding you knew nobody ever messed with his particular point of view. He liked hauling us around. Giving us an education. The real world and all.

Odd things happened though. Posters and books got moved around my best friend's room at night. There were voices now and then, untold coincidences. Her mother hadn't made them happen or even called ahead to say they might happen. But it was that kind of time. A peculiar darkness prevailed and we let it.

We were earth signs, so no wonder. But such things never happened to me. I had a day job. I had a guest room and a car I'd almost paid off with my own money. None of that protected me from my wandering and worried heart however. I still had those buckets coming out of my ears.

Which is why best friends mattered in those years of the war and Nixon and rock star suicides. One afternoon she came over to sit in the sun and watch me bake a loaf of lemon bread with a scent so lovely and lingering it might foretell a better future. I think she was stoned, as singers were supposed to be. She wrote me a poem about the scent of the lemon. It's still here somewhere. And so is she. And so am I.

A HAUNTING FACE

The nuns called it comfort contact, which seemed to make sense. A neck rub here, a back rub there, and the cold winter passes. It wasn't like the girls at the convent boarding school had any other kind of touch. And they were sixteen or seventeen. Ready, I mean. One summer between college years my roommate and I hung out with two girlfriends who'd learned all their moves from the nuns. They acted like people in love, hugging and cuddling and rolling about like puppies with their toys. And we were all on a lark anyway. It was easy to understand.

Back at school I met a transfer student from New York City, a man eight years older, who carried an aged, elegant messenger bag and wore tortoise shell glasses. He lit up when he saw me across a room, took me out for coffee, told me stories, offered me English Ovals, which I learned to hold just so and inhale in the French style, with that quick turn of smoke into my nose and out again. We played opposite one another in some expressionistic theater production where we were known as He and She. We had a certain inevitability, both dark, both Capricorns, both loving words and where they could take us.

I have something to tell you he said one night after all our coffee and English Ovals and talk beyond talk. He sat deep in an upholstered rocking chair. I'm a homosexual, he said and smiled, serene and ancient, waiting to hear whatever I might say back to him. But I said nothing. My vision blanked, disappeared completely, as though all lights had been extinguished and all at one time. Just for a second. Or even less than a second. And when I could see again, he was still there smiling.

I went to the library to look up homosexual. I'd heard rumors before, insinuations, but they were nothing to me. And then they were, and a term, a definition, had slid in under the door and knocked the sight right out of me.

The next month he fell in love with a muleteer in *Man of La Mancha*. My friend was Don Quixote, of course, dressed in grand armor, galloping into windmills, dashing across strange lands to conquer the nothingness of dream. I played the innkeeper's wife, a shrew who stole the show for those five minutes I got to rant on stage. In the corners of the theater, I sometimes saw the knight with his lover. But they weren't common knowledge. We were common knowledge. He lit up when I came into the room and shared his imported cigarettes with me.

The play ended. The year ended. He got a fellowship to Oxford, and I moved on to a grade school teacher who wore polka dot shirts and had never smoked a day in his life. And then I moved on again. For brief spells I spent time with an ex-convict, a divorced church janitor and a math teacher who liked to show up in the middle of the night. One lover mined uranium in Utah before bolting to the Gulf of Mexico to work on the tugboats. There was always someone.

And things fall into place. After awhile they even begin to make sense. Everyone can love whomever they choose, find whatever haunting face, light their secret flame. Don Quixote and the dancer didn't last. I don't think those two lovebirds from the convent did either. But they had their time. And now that time is all of a piece, wide across a blurred yet hopeful horizon. Faces come and go. Lovers. Pals. Inevitable cohorts in all our strange lands.

WAY LEADS ON TO WAY

We headed north in a van one August, though we were already almost as far north as we could get. Still we rumbled up Highway 61 to the Canadian border, which I no longer remember if we crossed. I do remember that we took on all kinds of side roads, pathways with deep ruts, even boulders, and grass growing down the center like the tufts of a bad haircut. We were on our own and on the move.

One girl owned a van, which was rusty and out of sorts, the way every van was then. These were not sports utility vehicles. These were not land rovers or trucks. They were always rickety two-tone vans with no springs and doors that stuck. We each had a sleeping bag to crawl into at night. We wore our clothes around the clock. We had bad breath and dry mouths and no room to even complain.

It was one of the things we did at the turn of the decade, between the rocket burst of the sixties and the slow burn of the seventies. We piled into vans with our cigarettes and small parcels of weed and we drove. We had a flag decal stuck to the back bumper, a satirical symbol of youth in rebellion. We did think ourselves rebels, though it didn't pan out that way down the pike. We studied music and English, social work and religion, and in just a few years would traipse off to downtown department stores to buy ourselves sensible dresses with shoes that matched. But for that late summer trek we had lace-up boots and ponchos. I wore boxy blue jeans that hung low, with every rip and tear embroidered around in bright unrecognizable flowers.

One day wearing that same outfit, I stopped by my favorite English teacher's house to talk of this and that. She was tall and grand, with an easy style and sophisticated furniture. She opened the door to me in my hiking boots and shredded jeans and laughed. But she didn't ask me to take off my boots. And she didn't cringe when I sat on her yellow brocade chair. We both took out our cigarettes and we talked. She had always been an adventurous reader, staying ahead of the pack, sharing Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg with me, never afraid of where the word might take us. On this visit I wanted to tell her the Catholic Church had lied to me, that Jesus could not be converted into cheap wine and that I would no longer turn myself over to this dogma. I said other wildly intelligent and forgettable things too, I know I did, and at the end of it all, she only smiled. You want black and white, she said to me. And it's always gray.

We contemplated one another across her sublime living room, where the patterns overlapped and reinforced, none of it perfectly matched and all of it perfect. She knew I would someday come to her point of view, that no matter what roads I clunked along for however many years and decades, I would find my extremes fading, I would read the poems more slowly and notice even the spaces that hovered between the lines. Which is why she continued to smile.

All four of us in that van had memorized the same Baltimore Catechism and kept the same revised version of the Vatican II missal somewhere in our bedrooms back home. But we swore like sailors and smoked packs of cigarettes a day and if any of us were still virgins, we didn't want to be. We wanted to be black and white, to see definitions and claim them as our own. We argued all the time, then laughed hysterically for no reason. We cut our road trip short anyway. Bug bites maybe or intolerable body odor, bad shock absorbers and a lack of sleep. We were much quieter driving back than we had been on the way out.

Later, years later actually, none of us could remember the same trip. In our minds we took different roads, found separate diversions, slept or did not, were high or were not, all depending. And who's to say. We were young and we had our ideas. The road rambled north along the lake, then past it and off to the indiscernible woods, where we all eventually find a nice little spot and spread out the blanket and stay.