

ALMOST PARADISE

an essay

by

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More than a decade. That's how long it's been since I "left the river." I don't say since I "moved to *here* from *there*" or "since I began living on *the mountain*." I say "left the river," as though I were saying "left the church" or "left my husband" or "left the country of my birth."

I left late autumn mornings with the windows open, when I woke to the cool mineral smell of silt. Afternoon picnics along the sandy shores, my children sifting the shallows for tadpoles, water skippers, mussel shells. Evenings flyfishing the V of current for rainbow, steelhead, salmon, then watching the moon rise over Angel Ridge, its silvery wedge of light illuminating the bridge below our house so that the ribbed structure itself seemed to levitate above the water.

The "lasting place." That's what we called it because we believed we would stay there for the rest of our lives, and we didn't.

We knew it was a move we had to make. My husband and I had taken positions 75 miles north at the University of Idaho, and the hour-and-a-half commute each way was impractical and sometimes treacherous; our children would soon be of driving age, and we dreaded the thought of the deadly Highway 12 being their proving ground; they needed more opportunities than our small settlement could provide teenagers not raising 4-H steers. And so, after a decade of living on the Clearwater, we moved from our home on the river to our home in the woods--three long

August days of manic runs up and down the canyon, back and forth across the prairie, the largest U-Haul we could rent stuffed full, potted plants and grubbed up herbs wilting behind the cab's hothouse windows.

By the time we made our last trip, I had been saying goodbye to the river for weeks: each morning, I would stand on our deck, soaking up the canyon's warmth as though I might hold it in reserve for the long winter I knew was coming. Twenty-five hundred feet higher in elevation, our new home wouldn't give me the early springs and long autumns I'd come to love. No more garden tomatoes lasting past Halloween. No more basil plants lush enough to provide us with a year's supply of pesto.

But, then, the bright side: no more wrist-thick rattlesnakes *mating* in the basil. No more star thistle so dense and vicious we couldn't find our way to the river except on paths worn through by deer. No wasps nesting in the eaves by the thousands, a hundred ticks carried in on the bellies of our dogs and cats, set loose in our beds to find the warm nests of our armpits. We could go to a movie on the spur of the moment, have dinner in town. And even though there would be no river--not even a spring moistening the granite and clay embankment outside my kitchen window—there would be the woods.

I knew how much I'd miss the river. Or I thought I did. But I also knew I was going back into the dream of my childhood—back into the forest I'd left at the age of twelve and believed I'd never regain.

My parents had come to Idaho from Oklahoma in 1956, leaving behind lives defined by poverty and alcoholism. My mother was sixteen, my father eighteen when they were married in the small logging town of Pierce by a Pentecostal minister. My mother set up housekeeping in a 8x20 shack—one of several circled in the logging camp along the North Fork of the Clearwater River. No electricity or tapped-in water, but enough isolation to make my mother long for her red-dirt home. She missed the open Midwestern horizon, the way you could see a visitor coming for miles because of the roostertail of dust along the flatland road. But not my father. He had found his paradise in that circle of trees that shut out the sky and kept the world at bay. My mother and father both found their salvation in that little Pentecostal Church. They set about making a new life for themselves free of their inherited sins: no drinking, no gambling, no dancing. My mother threw away her makeup and swimsuits; my father gave up his love for Willie and Waylon. They purified themselves in the snowmelt of May, both baptized in the same watershed we drank from, from which we took enough trout to hold us through the longest winters.

I came to an awareness of myself as a young woman in that time of national turmoil that hardly touched us at all. Even though it was 1969, the war that raged overseas came to us muted and late, if at all. No television, no radio or newspaper to distract us from our daily attention to doctrine. No teenage fashion magazines for me to moon over. As a member of the Holiness sect, I could not wear earrings, cut my hair, listen to worldly music, or join the cheerleading squad. As a daughter of Eve, I was a temptation to myself and those around me and, like my mother, I must remain silent and invisible. Surrounded by the women and girls of the church, physically isolated from the world around me, I had no sense of what I might be missing, of how different I

might be. I was *saved*, and my family was saved, and we lived, I was told, in the palm of God's hand.

I remember warm summer days playing in the mica-laden creeks, my mother--so young!--sunbathing on the pebbled banks. I remember cold fried chicken and watermelon laid out beneath old-growth cedar, my father fishing the still free-flowing river while my younger brother napped in my mother's lap. I remember my own baptism, how the preacher bent me back until my face submerged and the world warbled in my ears. I remember little other than contentment. I remember a pure happiness. What I feel is nostalgia for my own innocence, of course, but it's more than that: I remember my parents' laughter. I remember *their* youthful pleasure. I feel how close they came to Paradise

It was a crisis of faith that took us from that place. The summer before my thirteenth birthday, my father believed he heard the voice of God telling us we must leave the land that had nurtured us, given us our living, held us together as family. Perhaps he believed that he loved it too much. That he had forgotten that Paradise could never be found on Earth but only in Heaven. Within twenty-four hours, we were packed and gone, leaving our shotgun-shack behind. We followed the river to the small city of Lewiston 90 miles southwest, to where the Clearwater joined the Snake and continued on its way to the Pacific.

Could my father have foreseen how that journey would break us all? How he would spend his nights driving a truck loaded with wood chips from mill to mill rather than sitting on the step of his shack, watching the moose dip its great head into the nearby pond? How my mother would have her own crisis of faith and begin to question her subservience? How his daughter, lost to herself, would find company with others existing on the fringes, marginalized by appearance or circumstance?

I rebelled, ran away from home, was found and brought back. I graduated from high school and left my father's house that night. I worked at fast-food drive-ins and milltown bars, stayed with men and left them, or they left me. Always, it seemed, I was searching, questing for that place left behind. Days off, I would follow the river back into the woods, alone or with a boyfriend, to hunt, fish, lie in the high meadows. I believed that there was something I might still find there, along the feeding streams of the North Fork. Cold mountain water surrounded by ponderosa, hemlock, larch, white fir: it remains my slice of Heaven.

In the summer of 1990, after several years of living in Lewiston, my husband and I discovered the house for sale in the Clearwater River canyon, halfway between my childhood home and the city. I remember us standing on the deck, looking directly into the eye of an osprey hovering for fish. I remember my husband saying that it made his soul sing. And even though the land was visibly barren--steep hills of thistle, sage, and cactus giving way to ravined basalt—I could stand in the kiln of high summer heat, look out over the river and sense the cool promise of deeply running water.

Only one thing was missing: trees. But some happiness *can* be bought. I made forays into town, brought back expensively bundled saplings from garden stores, cleaned out the bare-rooted dregs at Wal-Mart. Ten Christmases running, I hunted down and purchased live

evergreens that we painstakingly acclimated into--and back out of--our too-warm house (sap rising, falling again) before pick-axing holes into the still-frozen soil for planting.

Still, it would be decades before our slips of green became a forest. Every summer, when the temperature on our deck hit 120 and the only mature pine cast its thin line of shade, we loaded up and headed out for our friend's high-country cabin, abandoning our river for the forested cool of mountain evenings. Our "pet cemetery" was crowded with chickens and rabbits that had expired in the heat, often because we had left them to a climate we ourselves could not bear.

I thought, then, that I might welcome the moderate summers on Moscow Mountain, our deck shaded by a tight stand of bull pine. In an area known for its peas and lentils and wheat, I have my trees--an island of wooded wilderness afloat on an ocean of loam. From where I sit, sheltered by the massive trunks and elongated boughs of conifers, I can see the land stretched out before me, undulant, as though sculpted by the movement of water, like an undersea bed of mounded sand.

But the water, if ever here, has gone. There is no lake, no river, no stream that I can see, only dry-land farming, marginal wells, and seeps that sometimes feed the smallest of ponds. Our first spring on the mountain, before the snow had melted from the roof, I badgered my husband into driving north with me to the nearest creek, where I waded into the icy melt and dropped a nymph into an eddy. The fry I caught and cast back was a tiny pleasure, but the feel of the frigid water around my knees, the smell so crystalline I could taste its sharp edges--I breathed it in, let it drill to my bones, and believed it was enough to sustain me a while longer.

Still, I grieved. Give it a year, a friend said. Moving is hard. But I was happy to be in our new home, our new town, among people I respected and friends I cherished. I know, I told

them--I know!--how lucky I am to be in this idyllic place we have chosen to live, blessed by family and a profession I value. I argued with myself, scolded. I understood that I could not have it all. Why, then, did my heart feel as though it were breaking? I felt true grief, as though I had lost a lover. When my husband asked, "What do you *need* to feel better?" I knew the answer without hesitation: water. I want, I need, I desire. *Water.*

In his memoir, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, psychologist and philosopher Carl Jung tells of one of his first memories: a childhood visit to Lake Constance. He remembers how his mother could not drag him away from the water. "The waves from the steamer washed up to the shore, the sun glistened on the water, and the sand under the water had been curled into little ridges by the waves. The lake stretched away and away into the distance. This expanse of water was an inconceivable pleasure to me, an incomparable splendor. At that time the idea became fixed in my mind that I must live near a lake; without water, I thought, nobody could live at all."

Jung's words are literal and absolute—no living thing can survive without water—but his words are also figurative and limited: not all of us need water to remain spiritually alive, but for some, it is the element that metaphorically nurtures the soul.

For Ed Abbey, it was the arid desert of the southwest; for my cousin Terry, it is the streaming populace of New York City; for my daughter, the intimate sidewalk cafes of Paris. We are not all born to love rivers. But, for me, the river is more than water and canyon. It is my history, my past, my inheritance. It is the story of my parents' quest for the perfect home in the

logging camps of the Clearwater; my coming to awareness of myself along the banks of Reeds Creek; the way my life is divided by the building of Dworshak Dam; how the death of the upper North Fork mirrored the demise of my child's sense of happiness, contentment, and shelter. And then, in the canyon of the Clearwater, my husband and I at the beginning of our life together; our daughter and son still young and in need of me.

If, by some true miracle, I were to be granted my river, have it carved out at the base of this mountain and filled in a thunderous moment of granite-shatter, would that erase my grief, grant me my sense of "home," give me my remembered Paradise?

That first fishing season after our move from the Clearwater to Moscow, we loaded our daughter and son, fishing gear, tent, and coolers into the car and headed north for the upper reaches of the St. Joe River, only a watershed away from my childhood home on the North Fork. The closer we got, the more vibrant I felt, as though I were passing backward through time, regaining lost years. I rolled down the window, breathed in, hung out my head like a dog, grinning foolishly, my eyes closed against the sting of wind.

I didn't wait to help unload, and no one asked me to. I nosed straight for the water and waded in. It was like eating pie after a long fast: I was feint with happiness, adrenalized with a sugary pleasure that I couldn't get enough of. I stood in the river for hours, casting my line, reminding myself to *look*, to *feel*, because I knew that soon it would be gone from me. And, two

days later, when it *was* time to go—after we had taken down the tent and stowed the coolers and everyone was belted in—I stalled. “Just one more minute,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

I ran to the river, bent down and filled my hands, rinsed my face, the back of my neck, my shoulders. I knelt on the hard rocks and began to cry and couldn’t stop, not even with the cold water against my eyes and my husband coming to check on me. Not just tears but gulping sobs. I felt as though I might die—as though some part of me might not survive—if I left that water again.

My family was very gentle with me, and more than a little frightened, I think. My children had never seen me like this, and my son worried that I was having *a nervous breakdown*. By the time my husband got me into the car, I was nearly immobile. Having left the river, I found myself lost, as though the story I had told myself of who I was had somehow disappeared, fell from my hands like a wind-torn map. All the long miles back, I remained rigid, unable to converse, as though caught in a limbo between two worlds, paralyzed by my inability to exist in either.

When she moved to Idaho, had my mother grieved for her Oklahoma farm as though she were burying her own mother? Had my father felt this same loss of direction when he left the wilderness he most loved? If so, how had they gone on to make sense of their lives? How had they resolved themselves to such grief? These were stories I had never heard, and without that

map to take the place of the one I had lost, I felt as though I were in exile, a wanderer of dry lands, no compass, no crumbs to find my way back home.

I think of Joseph Campbell's examination of myth and the adventurer's journey toward rebirth. "There can be no question," Campbell writes, "[that] the psychological dangers through which earlier generations were guided by the symbols and spiritual exercises of their mythological and religious inheritance, we today...must face alone..."

If we lose our stories, our myths of shared journeys, what are we missing? If paradise is not simply a place on the land but that place we must continually travel toward, meeting our demons and rescuers along the way, who or what, if not our gods and our ancestors and the stories of the land itself, do we expect to guide us? "In the multitude of myths and legends that have been preserved for us," Campbell says, "we may yet see delineated something of our still human course. To hear and profit, however, one may have to submit somehow to purgation and surrender."

Purgation and surrender. Words I know well from my Pentecostal upbringing. Words I know not simply as concepts but as experiences, having taken myself to the altar of penance and into the icy waters of Reeds Creek for baptism; having given myself to love and to the bearing of children and to the possible loss of both. I understand that purgation and surrender are about nothing so much as letting go: of control, of dread, of desire.

I think sometimes that what we long for--what we desire--is the very life we are living but can't yet recognize. Like the major in Hemingway's story who has lost his wife and cannot reconcile himself to her death, my grief for the past often causes me to separate myself from the present. I mourn that "other country" I am no longer a resident of. The future is a narrative that does not yet belong to me, and so I fill that void with what I have known, cannot let go of, and

fear I may never regain. "There are periods of decline," the author Ernst Junger writes, "when the pattern fades to which our inmost life must conform. When we enter upon them we sway and lose our balance. From hollow joy we sink to leaden sorrow, and past and future acquire a new charm from our sense of loss. So we wander aimlessly in the irretrievable past or in distant Utopias; but the fleeting moment we cannot grasp."

You see, it is not simply the place that I miss, but the recognizable stories it contains. I miss the river because we took our children there to learn to fish and to find the shells called angel wings and to swim carefully at the edges of eddies. Because it was there that our daughter buried her precious stuffed bunny in the sand, where she believed he'd be safe and warm, and no one knew until it was too late, until the water had risen and carried him under. Because her little brother wanted to go back and find it for her, even in the fearsome dark. Because that is where our black Lab Violet, now dead, swam out to fetch sticks and returned them to us, again and again, until dusk made it impossible for us to see her and we feared she'd been swept away. Because my husband and I found solace and inspiration there, alone or together. Because, at night, we spread blankets on the deck and watched for shooting stars, and, when the children had fallen asleep between us, we talked quietly about our lives in that place—how blessed we were to be there, the moonlight off the river a silvery reflection.

If we had waited another year, or even two, would my enchantment have lessened? The children would no longer be satisfied with hours playing in sand, and our time spent driving the dangerous river road would have increased with each new activity: music lessons, sporting events, girlfriends to proms, boyfriends insisting they will drive out and pick up. Perhaps I would have found myself sitting on the deck alone, waiting for the stories to continue when their endings had already been written, even as the river below me flowed on.

What I know is that the stories that take place in a particular landscape are what give us a strong sense of belonging, of attachment. They give us a sense of shared history, a narrational investment. In an interview, Barry Lopez once said, “For me to know a man, I must have him walk me out into his land and tell me the stories of that place he has *chosen* to live.”

How can we separate ourselves from the land that holds our stories? As mobile and transient as many of us are, how do we maintain a stable identity and not lose some sense of our place in the world? What do we *miss* when we can no longer say, “*There*, my mother made us a pallet beneath stars. *There*, my father lifted me into the branches of the elderberry. *There*, we buried my grandmother. *There*, where my son and daughter built cities in the sand, I myself once played, and the water that washes their feet once washed mine.”

“When in Kyoto, I long for Kyoto,” wrote the Japanese poet Basho. What I long for are the hours of my life both forward and back to be with me always. I want the river *and* the trees, my youth and my old age, my virgin state and my lover and the children I’ve borne. I want my story to contain all that I want. And in that wanting is my life going on without me.

What I *need* are the stories that will keep me moving forward in a narrative I recognize and understand. The stories of travel, travail, and transformation that my people have created for me, and the stories that I must now listen for and relearn so that I might pass them into the ears and mouths of my own children.

In his memoir *Hole in the Sky*, Bill Kittredge writes: “...knowing the story of your people in gossipy detail means you’re nearer to placing yourself in relationship to what is called the blood of things. I tell my own stories, and I move a little closer toward feeling at home in the incessant world, but I can’t imagine where I would want my ashes scattered, not yet.” Kittredge goes on to say that “if we want to be happy at all...we have to acknowledge that...we are part of

what is sacred. That is our main defense against craziness, our solace, the source of our best politics, and our only chance at paradise.”

I sit on our deck on Moscow Mountain, breathe in the incense of yarrow and fennel, hear the California quail calling “*Chi-CA-go, Chi-CA-go.*” My children have found their footing in this new place, ventured out into the world to set the course of their own lives. Just as I feel the loss of my own childhood, I grieve the loss of theirs.

I miss them like I miss the river.

Even now, the river's echoing thrum follows me into sleep. Often, my dreams are made of nothing more or less than the simple and singular event of standing in moving water. What I know is this: I am on a journey, being carried along by the swiftly moving waters of my own life.

There is the tangerine slant of sun and the elongating shadows purpling the hills. There is the promise of mild September nights, a bottle of wine, and baseball on the radio. There is my husband beside me, making plans for the woodshed he'll build next spring.

When he goes inside, I'll stay a little while longer, try to *feel* this place that I have come to, wait with a certain kind of faith for that part of my story I cannot yet know. If I listen, I'll hear it: the wind sifting the trees. It is a sound particular to yellow pine forests—a gentle shushing through the long-needled branches. A rushing current of air.