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Travels with Chester

There is no better journey than the one that takes you home.

THE FIRST DAY I SAW CHESTER MCQUIGGLE WAS THE SAME DAY I came out of my tree. I mean that literally. You see, I'd been in the Redwood Forest in northern California during an unkindly wet spring, and my cheap little Canadian Tire tent proved itself useless in those rains. That's when I found my tree. Redwood trees are massive; they dwarf people. The rain was soaking me and my backpack right through to our insides. The enchanted forest was losing its charm as I looked around that empty campground for a place to set up my tent. Then I spotted her. She was a hollowed-out redwood with an opening like a cave, big enough for me to crawl inside and stay dry. Once inside I realized this tree was big enough to lie right down in. So I'd found a home for the night, a dry home, and it wasn't going to be another night in that lousy tent. As I settled in with my sleeping bag, I wondered if anybody had ever lived in this tree before, perhaps a gold miner, an Indian princess or a deranged hermit.

*In the interest of privacy,
the names in this story
have been changed.*

—MBB

I was twenty years old and on my very first solo journey of discovery. That spring was the first time I'd ever tried hitchhiking. After the initial free ride down the Banff-Jasper Highway in the Alberta Rocky Mountains, I believed I was hooked on the freedom of hitchhiking forever. I felt like a female Jack Kerouac on the road, full of exhilaration and fever for adventure. And it's so easy. Best of all are the characters who pick up hitchhikers. People of this planet have so much to find out about each other and what better way than through the noble and neglected art of hitchhiking to discover how different people experience their part of the world. And if I ever felt they might experience it in an unpleasant sort of way, I always carried a few cloves of raw garlic in my pocket that I could start chomping down on at any time to deter any would-be aggressors. Fortunately it never came to that—raw garlic itself tasting unpleasant. So whether in naïveté or wisdom, I hitched out to British Columbia then south down the rugged west coast, stopping many times along the way for further adventures and various waitressing jobs, then on to that northern Californian land of the green-leafed giants where we realize how small we really are.

It was three days before I got out of my tree. It took that long for the rain to stop. But I didn't mind one bit. I was starting to identify with the Buddha—insights, revelations, cramped legs. I don't think I actually slept that much, not that it wasn't comfortable; it was the ideal hovel, but I was too elated to sleep. How many chances does a person get to live in a tree? Everything around me became electrified and alive: the steady beat of the falling rain as it splashed down through the leaves onto the forest's dark floor, the rumble of a nearby brook; the very air I breathed seemed charged with an energizing mist. Towering redwoods took on subtle details. It was as if I were seeing everything for the first time or as if I had seen the world as a child. A vibrant green was taking over the forest, a green that could never be found in a paint store. This green was passionately awake and wildly alive and for those three days, so was I.

I remember looking out of my tree's entrance, feeling like a spy, awe-struck at the stately and all-knowing presence of those an-

cient kings and queens of trees all around me. They'd seen rain like this for many hundreds of years. The history of the world was ever-unfolding while they stood strong and solid: as empires came and went, as wars to end all wars never ended, and as people searched for answers they never seemed to find. I felt humbled sitting in and among those pillars of wisdom because I was learning from them that a constant search for answers is futile. These trees didn't question their existence and their life; they were life, perfect in every moment of their existence.

I'm not quite sure now what it was exactly, nor was I even sure a week after leaving the tree, but something happened to me in there that changed me forever. I only know when the rain finally did stop and the sun broke through out of the bluest sky I'd ever seen, everything seemed different to me. When I walked back out onto the road, I got a ride from an ordinary friendly sort of guy, or so I'd think today if I were to meet him, or I would have thought before my stay in the tree. But then, after my monumental awakening in solitude, this particular human had me baffled. He talked on and on about his job as a lumberjack, the economy, the weather. . . . I watched in horror as the words emptied out of his mouth, all strung together yet meaning so little. The drone of his voice faded as it struck me: this is it? There's so much MORE, I wanted to shout. But I couldn't. I was barely able to utter a word to him. What could I say? Tell him to go and live in a tree for a while and then we'd talk? I worried myself that I'd lost the ability to communicate with my fellow humans forever. Fortunately that never happened. Like a powerful summer storm that bolts down on us suddenly then leaves the world freshly

While the stream badgers the solemn hemlocks, I stop to touch the fallen tree. It is remarkably alive in its decomposing. I fancy I sense a pulse under my fingertips, as the tree gives its life over to new forms—moss and grub worms. The blond, damp splinters witness to surrender, to the yielding of life to life, and death to life. Receiving the gift of the tree, I bow and walk on.

—Karen Monk, "Spirit Walk,"
Another Wilderness: New Outdoor Writing by Women, edited by Susan Fox Rogers

stimulated and clean for a brief while, the intensity of the experience gradually diminished as time passed. Vibrant green became just ordinary green again. Practicality and Canadian Tire tents weren't always a bad thing. It's hard to hold on to that which we try to grasp. Maybe those insightful moments of brief encounters with revelation aren't meant to last forever. Life would look pretty different if they did. But somewhere deep inside of me, those three days living in a tree left an imprint on my soul which can never be washed away by anyone or anything, even the heaviest of rains.

Now to get back to Chester McQuiggle which is the story I wanted to tell before getting sidetracked with the tree thing.

When the alien-like lumberjack dropped me off at a gas station on the coast I was dying of thirst so I bought a drink at the roadside store and sat outside on the porch. I shut my eyes and aimed my face right into the sun. That's when the noise came—blaring country and western music, the worst of its kind. I opened my eyes to observe the specimen in front of me.

He wasn't what one would call a big man although he must have weighed a good 250 pounds. But most of this seemed to be concentrated into some sort of eerie tabloid, "Man gives birth to a giant watermelon" shape, set above his low-riding polyester brown pants. His sweep of dirty-silver hair blocking out one eye tried hard to give the effect of distilled youth but fooled nobody. He was probably 65 years old. Oddly, his legs were short, skinny even, which struck me as funny since he and his stomach took up so much space perched on top of his equally large, luxury-style motorcycle. It was the legs that made him appear ridiculous.

Even more impressive was the collection of sprawling odds and ends strapped onto the back of the motorcycle: a Disneyland pillow, a frying pan, a clear plastic bag of socks, a bag of squished hot dog buns, a carefully folded Texas flag, a box of assorted chocolates, a sombrero.

The country music was exploding from this beast of a machine's stereo speakers. It had to be an expensive bike, probably brand new too. The man wore a brown leather jacket which was far too small

for him and those '70s-style zippered ankle boots. He sauntered up to the porch and bought a double ice-cream sundae at the counter, extra chocolate sauce, no nuts. He left the music on for everyone's enjoyment. "Howdy there. Where ya from?" Oh no. My backpack was giving it away that I wasn't a local. I felt like saying I wasn't from this planet but decided it would be safest to say I was from L.A. instead of Canada. It might deter any further conversation. It didn't work. He proceeded to tell me how he'd just been "verbally harassed by California delinquent brats"—even worse than the kids who had laughed at him when he was going through Texas, he explained. I could have laughed myself as I imagined the reaction he must have been causing throughout the country on his motorcycle crusade promoting sappy country music and a fully bloated ego and belly. Stereotypical loud American, thought I.

"Chester McQuiggle's my name. From Tarmfoot, Nova Scotia."

"Nova Scotia? You're Canadian?" So much for stereotypes. "Me too. I haven't met another Canadian in ages. I'm from Ontario." We shook hands.

"Well, they had a big tornado in Ontario," he told me proudly. "Most of them up there in Ontario are dead. Yep, big tornado."

"What! There must be ten million people living in Ontario. They can't all be dead," I pleaded as I thought about my family and friends lying devastated or dead while I'd been contemplating the wonders of rain and eternity in a tree.

"Well, not all dead I guess. It did hit one town though. Yep, pretty bad. So where ya headed?"

It struck me at this point that I wasn't exactly sure where I was headed. There'd been a debate going on in my head between the "Live for the moment" version of life versus the "plan ahead, set goals, work towards the future" perspective. Just then I wasn't too clear which side was winning. Certainly the tree experience scored some points for the "live for the moment" ideal. It was one of those summers of the kind they like to call coming of age or the turning point in novels, when we try to figure it all out, think we have, find out later we never really knew anything but at least we had a good time, which is something after all. I had just finished

my second year of university and was on one of those disaffected youth quests for deeper meaning, more immediate experience with life itself rather than just reading about it. I loved my free-spirited wanderings facing life head on even if the occasional rain storm, dark night, or encounter with the west coast's superiority complex did put me off sometimes. Chester's inquiry into where I was headed forced me to think about all this. After all, it was a logical question. Living for each moment, the accumulation of what actually makes our life, the journey itself rather than the destination—all this seemed reasonable to me. But it was a lot harder work than I had thought it would be.

"I guess I'm headed for adventure."

"Adventure? Nope, don't know that town. All kinds of crazy

My first big trip was hitchhiking around New Zealand with a friend for six weeks. We were both in wheelchairs. No one believed we were hitchhiking; they'd drive by and just wave. We carried bungee cords so our chairs could pack easily into cars or trucks.

We spent six weeks traveling the North and South Islands. Our longest wait for a ride was three hours. Every night (except two or three) we were invited to stay in people's homes who we met hitchhiking. People fed us and gave us grand tours of their communities.

—Susan Sygall with Thalia Zepatos, *A Journey of One's Own: Uncommon Advice for the Independent Woman Traveler* by Thalia Zepatos

He handed me an extra helmet and off we sped up a winding steep road that ran along a cliff overlooking the ocean. When I

names for these California places, eh? How'd ya like to go for a ride on the bike with me. Great day for a ride."

"Geez, that'd be great but are you kidding? Look how packed down it is already with all your stuff. My backpack's pretty heavy."

"Nah, there's always room for more," he told me as he picked up my backpack and shackled it down on top of his cargo. Completely amazed at the ease with which he could accommodate my backpack on top of everything else, I thought of protesting some more then thought, why not?

"Well okay," I said. "I'd love to go and it is a gorgeous day."

looked down I could see giant waves pounding against the cliff bottom. Beyond that the violence and expanse of the sea thundered out into forever. It was spectacular. I was surprised at how undeveloped this part of the coastline was. I'd always imagined California to be packed with people everywhere, the last stop for people who come from somewhere else, 20th-century pioneers in search of the golden life who left their lives and the cold back East. But here in the northern part of the state, the land appeared empty of those people.

"This is fantastic!" I shouted over the roar of the engine. Adrenalin-laden ecstasy tangoed all through me like it never would consider doing when driving enclosed inside a car. Mundane concept—windows. The wind wrapped itself in a rage around my body and whirled itself through my hair. The ocean mist cooled and dampened my skin while the sun warmed me to my core. I was a *part* of it all.

"Yep, fantastic is right," Chester shouted back. "She's a beauty."

I didn't mean the bike but I guess it was okay too. I meant the whole thing, roaring through the countryside up high over the sea with the sun and wind slapping me in the face. I was free and alive. My mind didn't travel to the future or the past for a second. I was living for the moment. I realized that this is it. This must be the way to live.

If I'd only known that the path to enlightenment could also be found by bumming a ride with a possibly pregnant Hell's Angel wanna-be bound for the open road, I might never have bothered with living in the tree. Then again, who can say? We're only twenty years old once, and must make use of every hovel and eccentric we come across. Otherwise, how are we to know what to make of this life?

Maybe an hour passed by of meandering our way along that coastal road. But it could have been much more than an hour. I had lost all concept of time since I was living for the moment and all. Chester slowed down and pulled into a scenic lookout on the cliff's edge far above the spray of the sea. He took off his helmet and walked John Wayne-style to take a look below.

"Some view this is. They call *this* a scenic lookout? They've never been to Nova Scotia." I think he was trying to impress me, somehow.

"But this is beautiful. Look at the way those waves are thrashing against those jagged rocks down there and there's no development here at all." I tried to say this politely. After all, he had just given me an hour, more or less, of the most blissful ride I'd ever had.

"Nope, sure ain't like Nova Scotia."

Forget it, I thought to myself. Let him miss the beauty.

"I'm headed back there now, can't wait," he said. "I'm going north to B.C. and straight east all across Canada to Nova Scotia. Should be back home in ten days or so. Wanna come with me? It'd be free for you and I've got this extra helmet anyway."

I fixated on his face for ten seconds without saying anything. Was he serious?

"Oh no I couldn't. That's crazy." A thousand thoughts rail-roaded through my head on the pros and cons of this most unusual offer. He was a total stranger. Yet, he did have an endearing kind of helplessness or naïve quality about him; I knew he was perfectly harmless. But travel thousands of miles across the continent with the guy? My head reeled. It would solve my current financial problem, that being I had absolutely no money on me except for a Canadian paycheck from the Alberta lodge I'd worked at and couldn't cash in the United States. And I always wanted to travel by motorcycle. It could be the perfect way to get back to Canada.

The idea, absurd at first, began to grow on me like an out of control weed. Suddenly, euphoria swept through me at the thought of the wind ripping through my hair along this powerful coast, then forging our way through the crude passes of the heathen Rockies, flying straight and reckless across the endless prairies, to migrate back to my forested home province of Ontario—which I was missing—then maybe farther east through Quebec, out to the salty dampness of the Maritime coast with its pastel-coloured, warm-hearted fishing villages. All that air to

breathe in with the sun warming my face, feeling the raw power of speed with so much to see, always, all around me, revelling in the single and pure moments of the journey itself.... If I could only get him to lose the corny country music station....

"Okay Chester. I'd love to go with you." For the second time that day, Chester McQuiggle and I shook hands.

Chester McQuiggle was a terrible driver. So bad in fact, that I considered changing my mind about the entire whacked idea even before we reached the Oregon border later that afternoon. But of course it was too late by then. I was hooked. I'd become a full-fledged motorcycle mama in the intervening Zen-induced moments of a two-hour ride of rapture. Except for the drone of the engine, we were experiencing a place of grandeur and eloquent silence. Or at least I was. Chester seemed to enjoy the experience of speed.

When we veered for a time away from the coast and blasted along a near-traffic-free road obscured from the sunlight by a forest of 200-foot redwoods, I felt a pang of remorse and guilt for zooming past these intimate giants, now my friends, at such a pace. These tree gods deserved reverence and quiet contemplation, but I could hardly shout that out to Chester. He was like a madman possessed, intent on taking off through the forest into flight perhaps, trying to defy gravity and beer gut all at once.

He did eventually come to a squealing halt, thank god. A sign saying, "WELCOME TO OREGON" by the roadside caught his attention as would every other "welcome to" sign for the next 5,000 miles. Chester began his camera search through every luggage container and duffel bag strapped onto that machine. I stood by, completely in awe, at how much junk he, or rather we, were lugging. Chester McQuiggle was a packrat, a souvenir storer, a heavy hoarder.

"Here's the damn thing. Now take a couple pictures of me in front of the sign. Make sure I'm not blocking out 'Oregon.' Gotta show my friends back home."

Chester has friends? I tried to imagine this "Chester-friends" concept as I stood, camera in hand, while he posed with his weight on one leg, hand on hip, head cocked, half-zipped leather jacket trying gallantly to conceal its portly contents. Snap: the state of Oregon welcomes Mr. McCool-quiggle. Look out all of you west coast-night-riding-biker-gang-scary types; Chester McQuiggle has arrived toting enough tacky souvenirs to offend and bully even the most tasteless angel from hell right out of you, with country music to nauseate the sappiest of you, and a twenty-year-old Buddhist biker chick on the back to utterly confuse the grievous tattoos off all of you.

Night fog from the sea had rolled ashore and the setting sun's amber rays had long since cast their farewell glow on our faces when Chester finally cooled his various engines for the night. It was a neon, flashing red sign that lured Chester off the road this time: "ALL YOU CAN EAT" proved as powerful a Pepto Bismol for seizing engines, it seemed, as "WELCOME TO...(anywhere, nowhere, population: 14)" and "SOUVENIRS FOR ALL." Those three signs, in their varied and enticing forms, are about all that ever did take Chester off his road.

I felt wind-swept and groggy inside the restaurant but luckily its abrasively loud and crass interior awakened my numbed senses. Chester delighted in the place and I could see he was truly in his element here. He really should have been an American. He didn't even wait for our overly-friendly waitress to present herself and give him his all-you-can-stuff-into-your-gut-and-pockets plate before he herded into line at the trough. That surprised me too because I'd ascertained by then that Chester aspired to be a womanizer, and roadside waitresses always seem doomed to be the compliant targets for the Chester McQuiggles of the world. Instead, he found someone's used plate on a vacated table and wiped it clean with his handkerchief.

I wished I hadn't seen him do that.

It was to be the first of several unforgettable moments on the momentous journey when it hit me, "Hey, who is this guy?" "What the hell am I doing this for?"

Between grazings, Chester told me that he'd started out on his continental trip from Nova Scotia with his then ladyfriend (ladyfriend?) but she had tired of travel (read, tired of Chester) somewhere outside of Portland, Maine one evening in a torrential downpour when Chester insisted on making Boston that night.

"Yep. Gladys just threw her helmet into a big puddle, unstrapped her suitcase and by dang, she was a goner. Can't take a little wet."

Gladys was a wise woman.

I learned something else about Chester that night, which if I'd given it any serious thought, I should have anticipated. He snored—not the expected, acceptable decibel level snore—but something far beyond that. There was no escaping it inside the hotel room even though I slept on the floor with a pillow and all my clothes over my ears, and the maximum distance away from the artillery fire. I had to trudge outside with my sleeping bag and sleep on a lawn chair in the hotel's back yard. Even then I could still hear the Maritime Marine Battleship thundering off shells in the distance.

Chester's weakness for souvenirs was getting out of hand. After all, we were travelling on a motorcycle, not a tractor trailer, and although this vehicle, like Chester, was of ample size, it did have its limits as to what it could carry. At the "WELCOME TO WASHINGTON STATE" sign picture-taking session, Chester learned from a retired couple about a souvenir shop which sold redwood carvings just ahead, five miles off the highway. Chester rarely ventured off the main highway—a point of contention between us—but for the ultimate in souvenir shops, Chester would make an exception. Thirty minutes later, we motored down the highway for Seattle, country music blasting, 40 pounds heavier and a tad lopsided. Chester had just purchased a genuine carved redwood four-and-a-half-foot totem pole. *Easy Rider* here we come.

As if the totem pole had given us wings, we found ourselves gusting through British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, passing all manner of traffic in our way. Chester was still possessed. If I sug-

gested we slow down for a while, or maybe even, god forbid, stop somewhere along the way at a lake, a small town, or a fruit stand, Chester would bellow back to me, "Can't stop, gotta make time."

Make time? What exactly does that mean? Chester was retired and had no appointments to be back for in Nova Scotia. What was the rush? Why had he even bothered to take a trip around the continent if he didn't want to see it? All he seemed to care about was getting back to Nova Scotia. He was missing everything along the way, thousands of miles worth of irretrievable moments, all just to GET THERE. I tried to convince him that somewhere is right here, now, along the way, but he never stopped to look, not even once. I realized then many of us live our lives this way, so focused on the future or a goal that we miss the journey of our lives along the way. Life slips away from us too quickly if we spend it on automatic pilot, lost in distraction, in unattended moments. But for now, seated behind the heavy hand of a motorman's fiendish fervor, I'd have to take his cue of getting my kicks out of speed and the open road. And really, that wasn't such a bad thing at all.

The Trans-Canada Highway, which I liked to call McQuiggle Highway, since that road was Chester's religion, passes right through Glacier National Park just west of the B.C.-Alberta border and the park is a place of splendor and magnificence. The morning we sliced through there, hawks and eagles soared above us so high into the deep blue above that they seemed to disappear into another realm. The groaning upheaval of the Rockies lofting up into their nurturing clouds stirred my soul and breathed Life into me. I was trying to feel each moment, take it all in with all of my senses, notice every detail I might normally miss. I let the ecstasy of being alive, awake, and present take over my whole motored-out being. We whirled by a turquoise lake cradled inside a near-translucent glacier but Chester refused to stop. Honestly, he refused to look! As loudly as possible I shouted this to the man: "Every moment stolen from the present is a moment lost forever. There's only NOW!" The words floated up into the mountain air somewhere and lingered, catching some hawk's ears perhaps, but not Chester's. Tarmfoot, Nova Scotia lay

ahead and by dang, Chester McQuiggle was going to make time that day.

I shivered all the way through the Rockies because we forged through a blizzard unleashed from hell, and Chester maintained a determined perversion to battle the blizzard and win. I thought some shelter from the elements and hot soup might be a preferable way to beat the nasty onslaught, but I'd learned by then that trying to persuade a tomorrow-bound maniac was futile. Besides, I was far too cold and exhausted to shout out my suggestion over the racket of storm and engine. Luckily, the aching tunes of studly lovesick wailers weren't part of the racket just then. Although the mountains stood cruel and austere that day, I thanked them for—whether in their compassion or good taste—they refused to allow country music radio waves to trespass through their valleys.

Somewhere out on the prairies of Saskatchewan late one golden afternoon, we came to a turning point of the journey. In a moment of clarity, I think I actually understood Chester McQuiggle. We had pulled into a divey roadside restaurant called "Farmer's Co-op" and upon entering, Chester nudged me to whisper, "Don't talk too loud in here. They're all gonna be commies."

"Commies? You must be kidding. Why? Because it's called a co-op?"

"Yep. This province is full of Reds."

That's it, I thought. I'm exasperated. I can't take him another second. But Chester wasn't finished. Inside the restaurant, Chester explained that the best president the United States had ever had was Richard Nixon because he had introduced Coke into China. That's when the turn-

Looking to find wildflowers and mushrooms, I bought myself a motorcycle when I was 35—a trail bike to explore the spiderweb of logging roads surrounding our North Woods Wisconsin summer home. Deep along those overgrown roads, I found abandoned houses instead—and abandoned lives. Depression-era loggers' homes suddenly and mysteriously left, some with dishes still on the table. You never know where a trail, or life, will lead.

—Paula McDonald,
"Unexpected Trails"

ing point came. I could have screamed and walked away forever, towards freedom or an asylum perhaps. But then it came to me. Okay, I get it. This is Chester McQuiggle. This is a lesson on the journey of life. Life is what you see in people's eyes. Accept, if not appreciate, the differences in people. I chose to laugh, do the "wise" thing, maybe because I had grown slightly wiser, or because we were at a dumpy roadside truck stop smelling of cows and greasy fries, somewhere between Nowheresville and 50 miles up the road from Hooterville, and the thought of being stuck there was actually even worse than the thought of indulging Chester in more of his twisted political paranoias. Besides, I'd come to see this journey as something of a challenge by then. A Chester Challenge. I couldn't just bail out; it would be too easy. This was the ultimate endurance test.

I've always thought the true beauty of the sunset comes not when the burning orange ball is falling into the lake, mountain, ocean, or prairie, but just after it has gone down and continues to shine its rays on the sky painting a luminous orangey-pink heaven when most of the world has turned its eyes away. But Chester McQuiggle refused to watch any of the sunset. Not even an hour had passed from the time of our last speeding ticket, and Chester was once again tearing across the Manitoba prairie at law-breaking speed. The sunset had cast the entire western sky a burning orange of such intensity I just had to tell Chester about it.

"Nope. Can't look," he shouted back over his shoulder, "Wouldn't be as good as the sunset over the Bay of Fundy anyway."

We blasted onward towards Ontario, breezing past the lucky ones on the other side of the road, the ones driving into the sunset, the ones who would never have to discern the logic of a certain faceless fellow journeyer they had just passed on McQuiggle Highway.

Northern Ontario takes forever to drive across and since I happen to be from Ontario, Chester concluded that the province's immensity was my fault. I think the long days of driving were start-

ing to get to him so I thought I'd accept the blame for the size of my province. But his edginess continued all across the north shore of Lake Superior. The strapped-on collection of souvenirs all over the bike was really becoming annoying. Chester was constantly rearranging things. Somewhere between Sault Saint Marie and Sudbury, Chester pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. I instinctively looked around for one of the "ALL U CAN EAT," "WELCOME TO..." or "SOUVENIR" signs but could see none of them. We were in the middle of nowhere and Chester McQuiggle had stopped for no apparent reason. We were in the middle of nowhere when Chester McQuiggle finally lost it: the totem pole I mean. He unloaded his stockpile of souvenirs amassed from across the two countries and proceeded to throw it all into the ditch.

"I can't take these goddamn things anymore. They're slowin' me down. They're falling off. I don't want 'em."

Chester was having a fit, a temper tantrum, and I thought it best to keep quiet, try not to laugh, and let him do his thing. He was right to liberate the totem pole. I sometimes wonder whatever became of that Washington State genuine carved redwood totem pole that got turfed into the ditch up there in northern Ontario, so far away from its home. Quite possibly, it's still up there, enjoying a much-deserved rest after a three thousand-mile ramble with a runaway maritime marvel.

The further east we got and the closer to Nova Scotia, the more urgent it became for Chester to GET THERE. We'd set off each morning at five-thirty or six after Chester had consumed massive quantities of greasy breakfast food substitutes and the first of his sixteen diet pops of the day. We wouldn't stop until eleven or twelve at night, having ripped through eastern Canadian places of charm lost to those whose eyes are more enamoured with the asphalt of the highway.

Chester seemed to have a strong dislike for Quebec and insisted on speaking English very loudly at gas stations in that province's villages where little English is spoken. By that time, I was well on my way to proficiency in embarrassment and I tried to compen-

sate for Chester's lack of social graces by smiling, rolling my eyes, and shaking my head behind Chester's back as we roared off so that the bewildered gas station attendants, store owners, and anyone else around, would say to themselves, "Oh, she's not really with him; she's just getting a ride, poor thing."

On the outskirts of Quebec City one night, I very nearly fell off the bike because, out of exhaustion, I'd fallen asleep. When I jolted myself awake to see my favorite Canadian city approaching, I considered getting off right then and there. Ditching the whole scene. I could have just been killed! I'd be free if I got off. Forever. Why was I staying day after day on that bike with a fanatic? Not only was it frustrating, deafening (engine, country music, and snoring), often embarrassing, and generally absurd, now it was dangerous too. But somehow, somewhere, this journey had become a compulsion for me, an obsession even. As effortless as it should have been, I couldn't just get off. I could have said *sayonara* back in northern Ontario and simply headed south and gone home. Maybe Chester's determination to get to Tarmfoot had blown back its irrational zeal onto me. All day long I'd see his shoulders hunched up, his head aimed into the wind bound for *THERE*—I guess it gave me a thrill. Not Chester of course, but the ride itself—a twelve-day amusement park ride which I was shamelessly addicted to. If I'd spotted an advertisement for a motorcycle-mad passengers-anonymous support group, I'd have joined up immediately. Yes, I'm a Road Junkie. About eight days now. But how could I tear myself off the back seat? No time to chat about it. By dang, Tarmfoot, Nova Scotia, lay ahead and I was just dying to get there.

Chester made a call home one afternoon at a pay phone outside a restaurant in New Brunswick, and it made me wonder about what he called his "people." I suppose it was all part of the curiosity I'd built up about Chester, the compulsion to see this thing through to the end, make sense of it all, rather akin to being compelled to snatch a glance at a traffic accident's aftermath. The restaurant served lousy food although Chester happily devoured three hamburgers before continuing his binge to gorge on the

white lines of the highway. But his demon driving habits no longer bothered me. I felt so weary by then that Chester being a road glutton had become a good thing. We were almost *THERE* and I think I could even smell fish, or fish factories

Chester was swelled with pride and swagger on the sun-blazing afternoon we pulled up to the "WELCOME TO TARMFOOT" sign. He'd finally accomplished his feat of *GETTING THERE*, and as I peered through the viewfinder of his little camera to snap that last shot of him, I couldn't help but feel a rush of gladness for my friend. Through all the lunacy and conflict of two diametrically opposed humans gallivanting across the continent together, it had been kind of fun.

We rolled into Tarmfoot and for the first time on the entire preposterous jaunt, Chester drove without breaking the speed limit. In fact, he moseyed. We held up traffic. Chester honked the motorcycle's horn and waved at people on the street as if we were in a parade. He offered the "royal glaze" of not looking directly at anyone in particular, just a general gaze for the masses welcoming home their king. This homecoming affair embarrassed the heck out of me but what else could I do but pray to the god of random chance that I wouldn't know anyone in town?

I looked at the faces of the Tarmfootians strolling down the main street, smiling and waving at Chester. Most of them seemed to know him, or at least, know of him. All of them gave me a thorough look-over and smiled as if they knew something I didn't. A young man shouted out, "Hey Chester, how long did it take ya?"

"Eighteen days and a half," Chester shouted back.

"Have a nice time Chester?" called out a woman with a squeaky voice wearing a cotton print dress and rolled up hair. I wondered if she might be Gladys.

"Yep. Eighteen days and a half," was Chester's proud reply.

A few more townspeople asked about Chester's trip as we continued our crawl down Main Street. The men all asked how long it had taken; the women all asked if he'd had a nice time.

As I sat contemplating this difference between men and women I noticed the signs above the stores: "McQuiggle Furniture" was

next to "McQuiggle Draperies" which was two doors down from "McQuiggle Hardware and Appliances." Across the street was "McQuiggle Sports Gear." On the corner was "Chester's Own: Baked Goods and Assorted Snacks." My God. Chester owned the whole town. Chester was the Big Cheese of Tarmfoot.

"Chester, are these all your businesses?" I asked, expecting him to reply, "Yep. Eighteen days and a half," since he seemed rather stuck on that particular phrase just then.

"Yep, sure are. Most of my ladyfriends run them for me now."

We pulled up to a corner store and Chester bought a tootsie roll and the local newspaper. He opened up the paper to the local affairs section and said, "Good, they got the day right." He handed it to me to read.

TARMFOOT TELLINGS

Chester McQuiggle is expected back today from his well-known, much-talked-about motorcycle caper which took him from Tarmfoot last month to Maine down to Florida, all across the southern United States to California, up to British Columbia, and back across Canada to his and our fair town. Word has it that Chester has a traveling companion with him. Who will she be and how will she have survived travel with our Chester? Welcome home, Chester, and a warm welcome to Chester's companion from all of us here in Tarmfoot.

I ended up staying a few days in that friendly little town of Tarmfoot before heading back home by way of the ferry to Maine. Chester's house outside of town and right next to the ocean was far too large even for him and for all the souvenirs which didn't make it. Too bad. They would have fit into the decor of the place. Chester gave me a room with shag carpet on the walls, a round bed, and a life-size, last-concert Elvis poster tacked to the door. Now I'll never have to worry that the decade of my formative childhood years is dead; the '70s are alive and sweating in the McQuiggle homestead.

Chester and I watched the sunset every night over the Bay of Fundy, and I realized he was right about it being more beautiful

than the sunset over the prairies. Not because it was more red, or any more spectacular, but because it was home, Chester's home. Since my home was the Road at that time, all sunsets were beautiful to me, but in this also lay a loneliness and a longing for one place in this world where a sunset moved me more deeply than anywhere else. Although Chester missed so much of the journey along the way, there was one thing he talked and cared about more than anything else: his town, his home. In Tarmfoot, he was a somebody, a rather comical somebody, but a somebody nonetheless. And that made him happy.

Maybe some things, some people, and places have to mean more to us than others. Maybe we all need to find our Tarmfoot whatever that may be—as long as it's something we can feel a part of and care for.

So I learned something from Chester McQuiggle, something I'd never appreciated enough before: home and friends. But still to this day, I must draw the line at appreciating country music. I just ain't never had no hankerin' for it.

Laurie Gough is a writer and school teacher who lives in the northern woods of Ontario, Canada when she's not on the road. Her teaching papers, backpack, and thumb have carried her extensively throughout various realms of the planet. She's currently writing a book of her travel adventures called, Unravelling Travelling Kite Strings of the Southern Cross.

The greatest sadness of all is to come home to "normal" life with your little travel notebook full of a hundred addresses and realize, after a year back in the rut, you have written to almost no one. All those shining stars in the firmament you have touched with the intention of holding, you now find your grasp releasing and they are gone, existing only in your memory—and theirs. Each moment—travel teaches you—is divine: each moment on the road, each moment at home. Cherish it.

—Jan Haag, "Last Minute Terror"