

## The Urge To Wander

Stephanie Mickelson

Sometimes I could feel it coming. Other times it took me by surprise. A restless energy that led me to drive aimlessly for hours as a teenager, dreaming of how it would feel to just keep driving, never looking back, and with no real destination. I always knew that my place was not where I had grown up, and I had escaped once, only to be pulled back in when my mom got sick. Once she recovered, I waited for my chance to escape, the urge to wander building inside.

That chance came one day in March when my college roommate from Pittsburgh, Els, called with news she was going to be receiving her station in the Navy. I talked to her as I wiped tables and refilled salt shakers in preparation for my shift waiting tables at a place in Columbus, Ohio. With ODS complete, she was facing preparing to move and was waiting on the Navy to tell her where. She mentioned that part of her preparation would be finding a roommate.

Before I knew what I was saying, I exclaimed, "I'm your roommate!" The words had flown out of my mouth with no hesitation. My escape had materialized, and with that, a plan began to take shape. I was moving, and I didn't even know where yet.

This wasn't the first time my desire to wander had flown from my lips and a decision made before I really knew what I was saying. I had chosen my first college in much the same manner. My mom and I sat in the food court at the mall as I kept an eagle eye on The Leather Hut, the belt kiosk where I worked. Looking through college pamphlets and brochures, I turned a page and declared that I would be going to Duquesne University. The picture of the fountain that I had stumbled upon determined my fate, and in that instant, I knew my decision had been made.

"Where is Duquesne?" asked my mom.

"It's in Pittsburgh," I said, looking at the heading for the first time. "Good. I like Pittsburgh."

I had been there once.

I applied to one college and one college only, convinced that it was the only place for me. I waited with bated breath for an acceptance letter and was elated when it came because I had since realized that not applying to any other schools could have been a bad decision. I spent that summer adding to an ever growing pile of stuff to take on my new adventure and feeling mounting excitement to finally get out of my hometown where I had never truly felt at home. Terrified, I began a new life in a new city and, save a minor bout of homesickness and an almost transfer to OSU, never looked back. I explored new places, met new people, tried new foods, and built a life that I loved on my terms.

The move home after my sophomore year wasn't really my choice. Mom had cancer, and I felt needed at home. I did end up transferring to OSU and, while I loved the remainder of my college experience, I couldn't help but feel cheated out of my great escape. The call from Els was a life raft in a sea of boredom.

April came and along with it, another call. I would be moving to Portsmouth, Virginia, a town teeming with Navy personnel, tunnels, and bridges where my career and husband were waiting. But I didn't know that yet. What I did know without doubt or hesitation was that this was the right decision.

On a sweltering day in June, I drove the moving van into the parking lot of my new home. I walked into the office to sign my lease feeling completely out of place. Bright tiled

floors and fancy vases stared me down making it clear I didn't belong there in my ratty jeans and travel worn t-shirt.

*What had I gotten myself into?*

I cried as I got ready for dinner that night. The enormity of what I had just done settling onto my shoulders. I had left a good life with good friends and a good job to scratch this wandering itch I had always had. The unknown suddenly seemed terrifying. But that was the exciting part. The rush of a new place, a new state, a new house, unknown streets and people. The prospect of a fresh start. To be anyone I want. And the terrifying prospect that I had made a mistake.

Two years later, as I packed the trailer in preparation for a move to Wisconsin and into another unknown with the man that was to be my husband, I realized the leap that I had made had determined my future in ways I never could have predicted. I moved to Virginia a broke, single waitress, and left with a masters degree, a career path, a future husband, and some money in the bank. I moved there as a kid and left a grown up.

That summer, I applied for a job in Idaho. Ryan and I stood at the base of a huge rock halfway up a mountain, eating leftovers heated on a campstove, and I felt that rush again as we decided to move over a thousand miles from our friends and family.

Once again, I was off on a great adventure, but this time, I had company.