No vacancy: Family vacations on the road, on the water, and on the edge.

Amy Jackson Sellers
University of Louisville

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NO VACANCY:

FAMILY VACATIONS ON THE ROAD, ON THE WATER, AND ON THE EDGE

By

Amy Jackson Sellers
B.A., University of Colorado Boulder, 1991

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Colleges of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
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For the Degree of

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In English

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University of Louisville
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A Thesis Approved on

March 26, 2020

By the following Thesis Committee:

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Ian Stansel, Thesis Director

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Paul Griner, Second Reader

______________________________________
Ranen Omer-Sherman, Third Reader
DEDICATION
This thesis is dedicated to my parents and sisters

Elmer H. Jackson
Suzi G. Jackson
Sara L. Jackson
Maggie K. Jackson
and
Amanda Jackson Goodwin

all of whom I would happily sit in the way way back with one more time.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Disclaimer: Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.
ABSTRACT

NO VACANCY:

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Amy Jackson Sellers
March 26, 2020

This thesis is a memoir about the best and worst of traveling on summer vacations with my family as a child and as an adult. This piece is an ode to both my parents and to the art of the family road-trip, which is all but lost thanks to cheap flights, cell phone screens, and a general reluctance to take significant time off work. By alternating between lighter and heavier material with each chapter, this memoir avoids the saccharine nature of nostalgia while still being true to all the brilliance and poignancy of the past. By telling the chapters through a timeline tracking my parents’ earliest trips, to those of my childhood, to my family’s continued reliance on summer vacations to keep us connected, this memoir explores the commonality and frailty of families when pushed to their limits—both good and bad—on the road to the next summer destination.
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I am in the driver’s seat for the first time on family vacation, having gotten my driver’s license after one failed attempt the previous summer (remember to watch the curb when you turn right off a one-way street—whallop, whallop). My sister Sara, who is one year older, is my navigator in the passenger seat, and we are on cloud nine for having escaped the back of the Cherry Bomb, the custom van that my parents bought used a few years before. Prince is playing loudly on the radio—still, after having been told to turn it down multiple times. Sara’s feet are in the sun on the dash, and the map is resting half open on her lap. We are plotting how we will play the Violent Femmes at some point on the trip without my parents knowing, perhaps when they inevitably fall asleep.

I have my left foot hitched up under me, as is the teenager’s prerogative, and my sunglasses are on. My hair is Sun-in kissed, and therefore, slightly orange, and everyone in the front of the van is happy. There is still the stench of Juicy Fruit and Wrigley’s Spearmint throughout the van—we are only on the first day, so the body smells that come from days on the road haven’t permeated the red shag carpet of the van yet. With me driving and Sara as co-pilot, we are ignoring everyone in the back of the van, including my parents and my two younger sisters, Maggie and Amanda. While we are in those two front seats, Sara and I are enjoying having no one to torment us, no ornery sister shoving her feet against the back of the captain’s chair, and Prince is still loud. In that moment, Sara and I understood why our parents liked this so much. Why they thought loading the van up for two hot weeks every July with enough stuff for four daughters and themselves wasn’t the nightmare we had always thought it was. The open road was calling to us. All our problems were behind us, even if a couple of them were only a few feet
back—still, they were behind us. We were leaving central Kentucky and heading west. To Wyoming, Yellowstone National Park, and then to Colorado. Endless adventure awaited us—all to the west. We knew the plan. It was marked in red on the map that was now sliding off Sara’s leg as she talked about visiting Prince’s hometown of Minneapolis and maybe getting to see him in concert in a smaller venue. She was part planning, part daydreaming, and not in the moment at all. Typical road-trip mind-wandering.

Our plan was to go north to Indianapolis and then basically take a hard left, slicing West across the entirety of Illinois, then stair-step up through Iowa, before hitting the long due-west drive through South Dakota and into Wyoming. There was a plan. Then I saw the signs for Chicago. They went by quickly, and I dismissed them. Sara had a 4.0 GPA. She was super smart, and she was in charge of the map, which had fallen onto the floor by this point. Then I saw signs I couldn’t dismiss—actual exits for Chicago. We weren’t supposed to be anywhere close to Chicago, and yet, there we were. I checked my rearview to try to get a read on Mom and Dad. Dad was reading in a captain’s chair and mom was laying down on the back bed—normally a bench seat until you pulled it out. She was tired with a headache. I would be very, very quiet.

“Sara. Are you paying attention? Look at the map.”

I whispered the last word with emphasis, and she picked it up off the floor and looked up, squinting into the sunlight at the road ahead. At the signs ahead.

She was taking too long.

“The signs say Chicago. I think we are in Chicago.”

If I had whispered the word “map,” I basically mouthed the word, “Chicago.” It still wasn’t quiet enough.
From the back of the van, in a shrill, piercing note that struck a chord like nails on a chalkboard, jeans on in the ocean, and a failing grade in typing class, my mother had risen and let fly, “CHICAGO? CHICAGO! ELMER? ELMER! THE GIRLS HAVE TAKEN US TO CHICAGO!”

Sara and I weren’t allowed to sit together again in the front of the van for the duration of the trip, serving an appropriate punishment for adding hours to a trip that was already demanding days on the road. But much later, when I drove again and Dad slept in the passenger seat during the long straight stretch in South Dakota, where cruise control took over and the van’s blinker slept, I slipped in the Violent Femmes CD and looked in the rearview to the way way back of the van and watched as Sara’s head turned towards mine, and we sang together softly despite the huge red-shag distance between us.

My sisters and I have a lifetime already of moments like these—funny, shrill, punitive, meaningful, lasting—all because we traveled together—a lot. We know our parents better, we know each other better, and we certainly know ourselves better because we know what it means to drive two full weeks in the way, way back. We know what it’s like to read for so long that you miss an entire state. We know how to hate a foot that is on your armrest like it the cause of all of the unrest in the entire world. We know what it is like to arrive to a destination and pile out and look out at a new land with all of the promise of an early explorer. My parents’ legacy isn’t financial, or a name, or property, but it is a lifetime of gauging years by the trips we took together. On sand, sea, mountain, plain, and island, we have come to our families and ourselves through time spent not lounging in a room with the TV on, or sitting on the side of an athletic field, or avoiding each other with busy plans, but instead by climbing into a red-shag carpeted time machine that took us to past, present and future, forcing us to see the best and the worst that we all had to offer, and finding we loved each other despite it all.
CHAPTER 1

THE MAP BECKONS

There is a U.S. map that hangs over the ironing board in my family home in Kentucky, mounted on thin wood that now shows as a dark, shiny brown at the edges. The map is circa 1974, and it has peeled away from the edges of its mount but still extends well past my wingspan. It has a great vintage look to it—though no Etsy buyer would want it because it's marked all over with red Sharpie marks of everywhere in the U.S. my parents have traveled. They are missing only a couple of states—Alaska and Idaho, to be specific. They’ve been keeping track since the beginning of their lives together. They only put up a new red line if they travel there together, so mom’s girls weekend in Vegas didn’t add Nevada to the mix, but when they both drove up to Las Vegas after visiting the Grand Canyon, Dad got the pen out again. They’ve put circles around the cities where they’ve lived. When home, I’ll rest my elbows on the ironing board (isn’t that what ironing boards are for?) and look at the red lines that included me. That’s most of the lines, thanks to the heavy-duty road trips we took every year when I was a child. So many miles covered, the red lines scatter and rejoin and almost pulse with the excitement and love of the open road and the next stop. These are lifelines on the map—a way to keep the blood pumping while the body stays put in a too-small hometown with no sea, no mountains, and no vast open highway to draw the eye.

My parents weren’t regular travelers growing up, but they did both get to wander just enough to imprint the notion on their beings. My father traveled with his parents and three brothers to St. Augustine, Florida, when he and his youngest sibling were on each side of 10 years old, and his older brothers were in their teens. They spent the first day on the beach, belly surfing
and climbing tall sand dunes. The photos are full of huge smiles and blurred bodies. They burnt so badly in the hot Florida sun that the rest of the trip was remembered mostly for skin blisters and ice packs. But there are still those photos—reminiscent of all vacation photos with smiles that feel so real you tend to smile back. But this Florida trip held a tiny kernel of reality, as my grandfather’s affair had already begun, the prescription medications had already been abused, and the messy, heart-wrenching divorce was slouching its way towards everyone standing in the sun, beaming at the camera. That’s the way of vacations though—they pull things together in ways that are both familiar and fake. Parents who sleep in separate rooms at home share a queen in the hotel room but turn away from each other during the night. Kids who normally avoid their sibling at all costs, build sandcastles and play Gin Rummy, being captured on film so that the memory warps a bit into a permanently happy one. With the way that sad memories linger, those pure moments on vacations—when everyone is a better version of themselves—can live on as well, and those glimmering memories can help take a little of the sting out of the realities that came before and after a trip to the sea.

My mother didn’t go on any real trips other than those just down the road a bit to visit family. But in my aunt’s version of family lore, she traveled to Arizona once with my Grandmother and older sister to live with an “Uncle,” who turned out to be my grandmother’s new husband. The story goes off the rails when the “Uncle” is caught still-married to a first wife, sending my grandmother with two daughters in tow—and a new baby—back to my grandfather in Kentucky, who was quite the gentleman to take them all back. I’m not sure if it was his largess or his Catholic guilt that made him open his arms again to my Grandma and her new baby, but whatever it was worked, because they stayed married until death did they part that time around, and they built a good life for my mom and her two sisters.

When my aunt told me about her vague memories of their time in Arizona, she remembers being in the back seat of this Uncle’s run-down car, the heat of the sand and dirt
traveling up into the car, and her and my mom getting really sleepy in the back. Then she remembers my mom leaning up against the door to rest more comfortably and then flying out of the car as the faulty door latch gave way. My mom somehow escaped with only a few scratches and a healthy appreciation for solid cars, but I can’t help but think of her as a child staring out that car window, watching the scenery rolling by in that haze of childhood’s ritual that was a vacation staple until the invention of screen culture. I think of her finding peace in the back of that hot car despite the craziness that surrounded her life, and then she fell and the entire tableau was left violently askew in a cloud of road dust.

My mom has never spoken to me about specific episode, nor does she talk much about her childhood at all—it’s a painful extraction to get her to travel back in time and talk about her youth. But, to be fair, she also doesn’t talk much about the good things that happened when she was young. For example, she doesn’t say much about going to Arizona after college through the Volunteers in Service to America program, which is now known as the AmeriCorps VISTA program. She worked on a Navajo reservation teaching children and helping to build a school there, and she fell in love with the people, the mountains, and her pony, named Pinocchio for his very long nose. She bought turquoise and silver jewelry on the cheap and became so tan, her parents hardly recognized her when she returned. She wanted to go back for another tour, but the one thing she loved more than anything in Arizona proposed to her, and so she got married to my dad instead.

I think that her time as a VISTA volunteer also helped her to redefine a place that had held only shameful memories before. She had been very young when her mother took her to Arizona on terms that were not her own, but after college she went with purpose, to help a culture she loved and to create something good in the process. When she came back from Arizona, she owned it in a much different way. The VISTA program initially had been an escape from a stale life, but I think it taught my mother how helpful a good escape can be and how a person can fight
to change her own story, even when given a poor excuse for a first chapter. So while her time with VISTA wasn’t a vacation, it certainly lit the travel bug for her, and as a young bride she was ready to see the world and get as far away from Kentucky as she could.

When I asked my father why they started taking trips like ours in the first place, he said I’d have to ask my mother. According to Dad, Mom was always ready to leave on the next trip. She picked a place on the map, and packed us up, and we went. He never questioned it. That was all my mom—being on the road was just intrinsic to her state of being. During my mother’s childhood she experienced significant poverty, the kind of shame that is bred by poverty, and domestic insecurity that left her both fiercely loyal to family and panicked about losing it. But she also experienced ferocious family love that kept her afloat during some massive familial eruptions, including what happened in Arizona with the “Uncle” and its aftermath in Kentucky. But the real value of that upbringing was how it left my mother wanting more. More experiences. More daring. More fun. More family. More of whatever. Always wanting more can lead to a lot of dissatisfaction, which can and did happen on our family vacations, but it also forces you to not settle and sit and wait for something to happen. My mom looked at the map and pointed, and we got more because of it.

My parents are both Kentuckians—my dad was born in Hazard, and, while my mom was born in Akron, OH, she moved to Kentucky so quickly that she claims it anyway. They met in high school—a quarterback and a cheerleader—and married a year after college. After that, their life together is traced on the map above the ironing board. The first circle was Louisville, KY, where Dad went to medical school, with his oldest brother sending him money when he could. The second circle was Memphis, TN, where my older sister was born and where Dad did his internship. Then he joined the Navy and they put another circle on Washington DC, where I was born during their short stint there. Not six months later, my Dad got his assignment and, just before some of the largest anti-Vietnam War protests shook the nation, my parents boarded a
flight with their two young babies and flew to Midway Island in the Pacific (the next circle on the map).

Not even the passing Russian ships casting Cold War aspersions could chill the next two years—spent in an idyllic island landscape with Albatrosses (aka Gooney Birds), flag football, Mai Tais, and endless white sand beaches. The photographs we have from this time period, most of which are still on slides, are ethereal and fantastically vintage—in a Wes Anderson kind-of-way. My mom and dad look like movie stars from the 60s (to be fair, every adult in those photos does), and beach time was a daily occurrence, as no matter where you were on the island, you were close to the beach. Dad loves the story of when he went running (paltry island mileage be damned), and he looked out into the water to see two wing tips rising out of the perfect blue water. They were twenty feet apart, rising and falling with water dripping with every arch. The wings followed him, slowing when he slowed, and speeding up when he sprinted. Then, finally, with a last parting flutter the massive manta ray turned and went out to sea. My mom softens the allure a bit by talking about the bugs that were so large she was terrified to open cabinet doors in the kitchen. One night she heard something moving in the kitchen and sent dad out to investigate. He checked everywhere in the house and came back to bed, saying he saw nothing. The next morning, he fessed up: When he had gone into the kitchen, he saw a pan lurch once on the stove. He came close enough to see two antennae peeking out, and, being tired, just left it alone. It must have crawled out after that, because it was gone in the morning when mom started boiling water for eggs. He suggested she wash the pot out first. They spent almost two full years on Midway, and they lived a life there that was much like a constant vacation—except for the bugs.

After his Pacific tour was done, my dad accepted a residency in Denver, Colorado, (the next red circle on the map) where my parents had their first taste of winter, mountains, and skiing. They both took skiing lessons that they had given each other as Christmas gifts, and they were hooked. They loved the cold rush of air as they swooshed along and the amazing views, with
brilliant blue skies stretching out over peak after peak of the Rockies. They took my sister and I everywhere they went, so we got up on skis early, as my parents took weekend trips to nearby resorts, driving farther and farther into the mountains whenever Dad’s schedule allowed. They found a treasure in the newly remodeled hot springs pools at Glenwood Springs, big as a football field with blue water to challenge Midway’s surf. They had never even known such a thing existed, and despite my mom not being a swimmer, she loved sitting on the sculpted benches in the shallow water and watching the snow fall and getting swallowed up by the steam above her head. Then they found Aspen around the same time that the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band was playing the Aspen Inn with Steve Martin as their opening act. John Denver had just moved to town and wrote Rocky Mountain High after a meteor shower lit up the mountain in ’72. The iconic Little Nell hotel hadn’t even been built yet, but the snow was pure fluff and there was still room for everyone. They fell in love with it—and perhaps more importantly, they fell in love with chasing the experience of finding a new place to love, a new landscape to inhale, new people wearing different clothes to gawk at, new food to fetishize or grumble about, a new anything that was not routine or regular. They fell in love with travel.

Then the residency was done and final decisions had to be made. A farm in their hometown was on the market, just down the road from one of my dad’s brothers, and the local hospital needed his specialty. My mom drug her feet, but there were the kids to think of, and family is family. So they moved back to Kentucky in 1974, just two months after the largest tornado to hit Danville roared through and took a tobacco barn off the hill overlooking the farm house. After that, things settled down. We moved in and the first few years were an adventure of a different sort. There were the cherry trees to climb, the barn to explore, and oodles of snakes to avoid—even in the house, at times. Dad bought a white-and-orange farm truck and a blue Ford tractor, while mom became the proud owner of a small herd of sheep and a pony. For a long while, we enjoyed the newness of it all.
While not flashy like Midway or the Rocky Mountains, it was a good life. But the pony bit and the sheep were too hard to keep watered in the winter during freezing spells. So we had to adjust, selling the sheep in the spring to take advantage of lambing season. Sara and I welcomed two younger sisters, Maggie and Amanda (with an eleven year difference between the youngest and oldest), and we were largely content to binge on *Little House on the Prairie*, eat peanut butter, sweet pickle and Miracle Whip sandwiches, and wander the farm looking for snakeskins and antlers. It was a quiet, easy childhood—a far cry from what my mother had experienced growing up. Our biggest trauma was that we went through nine dogs during my childhood and more cats that I could count—mostly thanks to Mom not checking under her car when she pulled out of the drive. But we looked out for one another, even as we drove each other crazy, and we always did a quick head count when mom picked up her car keys to leave.

My parents still live on the farm, with their map hanging over the ironing board in the back hall, a central location leading to my parents’ bedroom to the right and the kids’ bedrooms up the stairs. The laundry room is directly behind and the two fancy rooms (living and dining—both not for playing) are behind the door next to the ironing board. The den (where playing was allowed) is through the doorway on the far left. One hall and so many ways to exit—but the map is the central attraction. It sits at the heart of the house but also shows all of the ways out of it.

My dad has gotten the better end of the deal, as he got to live close to his three brothers and his mother and father, while raising his family in the same town he was so proud to have grown up in. For him, the family vacations were a great way to explore new places with his girls, and he loved that time together. He was more focused on the sharing of the experience of a new place, new people, new food, etc. But those vacations were different for my mother. She had always craved something “else,” something “other” than what she had at home. She wanted new places to fill every void in her life—for her, the vacation was hers. As a stay-at-home mom back in the hometown she thought she’d shed, she was an explorer chained to a Volvo and a window
over the sink. She certainly couldn’t complain, her life was lovely—but it wasn’t the one she had wanted so she looked to the vacations to greedily consume as much geography, culture and adventure as each trip could store. She wasn’t one for scrapbooking or journaling, but her mind was a steel trap when it came to vacations. She can tell you what roadside attraction wouldn’t let anyone under three in (a reptile farm in Georgia—she didn’t fight the rule, assuming it was for a good reason), the name of the restaurant with that lemon tart with the perfect crust and the in-season fat blackberries on top, the river with the perfect swimming hole with a rope swing in Vermont, the town in vast Wyoming that had a perfect view of the sunset over the mountains, and the terrible motel we had to stay at on our first night in Wisconsin—the one where she spied the roach on the bathroom wall once all the kids were already asleep. Her memories would last her through the doldrums of soccer, Algebra homework, and sleepovers. She tended not to be too picky about where we went for vacation—but she always pushed for somewhere new and as many places as we could possibly fit in the time allotted. She was a voracious traveler, only hemmed in by real life.

In her most regretful times, even now, as she is counting down to the big 8-0, she will talk about how she had wanted to live out west. How she had wanted to see those mountains every day instead of only a few days a year. She had never wanted the familiarity of her hometown, nor the humidity, nor the politics. Whenever one of her girls mentions moving back, she shoos us away, saying “Why would you come back here?” But we are our parents’ daughters. We feel the pull of Kentucky and family just like Dad did, even while living hundreds of miles away like Mom would have liked. And we all split the difference with yearly vacations with our parents and sisters—honoring the tradition even as we should have long ago aged out of such a thing. Still mom grumbles, listing all of the places she hasn’t yet seen or wants to see one more time. Dad just pats her hand, and says he knows. Then they call the travel agent.
CHAPTER 2

CIRCUS PEANUTS

Family vacations at Virginia Beach were an education for me, as my Aunt Betty spent the evenings with eyes red-rimmed from Tennessee whiskey and her throat scratchy from menthol cigarettes. She and my Uncle Joe danced and laughed and seemed so much more worldly than my parents—who didn’t drink or smoke and looked down on those who did. I likened Aunt Betty to a Hollywood starlet (perhaps a faded one, but still), and the best part was that she liked me best. I had three sisters, all cuter and slimmer, but Aunt Betty would wink at me and say that she and I were two peas in a pod. It was rare for me to get singled out in a positive way, and it was the best feeling I knew.

Betty had two sons—William Russell was the oldest, same age as my older sister, and David, who was 7 years younger than me, the same age as Maggie, the third daughter in my family. William Russell was artistic and drew comics constantly. He was precise, funny, and loved the Washington Redskins. He had handwriting that could have been a font. David was sort of a wash. He was on the heavier side, and I couldn’t quite figure out what he was interested in or what he was good at. He could have said the same about me, but Betty found me interesting anyway. Betty was the kind to suss out the weak and love them a little extra. So she had a soft spot for me—and for David, who she fawned over. My Uncle Joe loved David a little more as well, once almost coming to blows with another uncle who was fed up with David and said so. Joe, with the heavy brow and foxy grin, was a banker and good with money—until he wasn’t anymore.
My grandparents were there too. William Russell lived with them most of the time, and it didn’t occur to me until years later that that living arrangement was odd. Mom never mentioned it. My grandma made underbaked oatmeal cookies because my grandpa liked them that way, and she played Gin Rummy with us until it was time for dinner or bed or just time to stop. Grandpa argued with my mom about politics until Betty turned the music up so loud, they couldn’t shout over it. Then she and Joe danced, and the booze flowed, and we all lounged around watching them, as if they were on TV.

During the days, we would attack the beach like it was Normandy. The kids would arrive first, lugging what we could. Then the moms would follow, picking up what we’d dropped in our wakes. We had chairs, bags with towels, books, and a sleeve or two of Ritz crackers. We had no water with us at all. If there was liquid with us on the beach, it was cans of beer and Coke in a cooler that Joe would drag from the house, leaving a slug-like trail behind him in the sand. We bought those short, stubby canvas rafts with columns of air that were so great for riding waves and for catching a breeze on the beach--and flying far away so quickly that we’d have to send a squadron out to try to wrangle them and bring them back to home base. My grandmother would usually be the last to arrive, after watching us from the porch while she had an extra cup of coffee.

We brought sunscreen in the bags too, but no one really used it. If you put it on at all, it was only after you felt like you were getting burned—it was never applied prophylactically. For the most part, even those of us with naturally fair skin would have a pretty good tan by mid-July, and the super dark St. Tropez tan was all the rage, so we would often put baby oil on instead of something with an SPF. My dad was the only one bothered by the sun, and that was just because the tops of his feet were weirdly sensitive to the sun, and they would get red and itchy with too much of the bright stuff. Naturally, he adjusted to this by wearing dark work socks on the beach.
My grandmother wore a straw hat and a caftan on the beach, with huge sunglasses that covered her petit face from brow to chin. She wasn’t worried about a sunburn; she just didn’t like to sweat. Grandpa loved the sun and loved to swim. Every day, he would swim straight out into the surf and then far, far past it, until his head was just a little pinpoint on the horizon. Then he would swim back. Sometimes, he was out so long, I would forget to try to find his little, bobbing head, and he would surprise me when he rose out of the surf, like an ancient God of water, sand, and spray. He was always in such great shape, and I don’t remember ever thinking of him as being old. Not until years later, when a knee surgery prep showed an unrelated heart condition, and the heart condition revealed an unrelated cancer. He went from ageless to gone in a matter of two years.

In the early mornings, just after sunrise and long before our united storming of the beach, Grandpa and I would take whoever was awake and willing and go out looking for shells, but instead we usually only found sharks. Fisherman would scatter on the beach, especially around the piers and catch one shark after another. They would line the beaches with them. My grandpa called them sand sharks, and they were only about two feet in length. Maybe they were babies, maybe they were a little bigger or smaller than I remember, but it stays with me—the vision of what seemed like hundreds of small sharks lining the beach where I was to swim later that day. So many, every single morning. I had a mixed reaction to them. On one hand, I was fascinated, and I would touch them gently on their soft bellies while the fishermen would laugh at me. But I also would think of them while swimming a little past the break, and every once in a while I would feel the rough scratch of a body below as it passed by my juicy calf, and I would pop up like a raft held under and stay exactly horizontal while I swam towards the beach, until a wave would catch me and tumble me to safety. Every morning, we would see the terrible catch of the day already being eyed by gulls and crabs, but by the time we were hauling our crap from the house to the beach, they were all gone. Not even a sign of them left in the sand, like they hadn’t
been there at all. You could almost forget if you really tried, until that little bump under the water reminded you of what swam below.

We would get out on the beach by around 10 in the morning and then head in around 3:30 or 4 p.m. to start getting cleaned up and ready for dinner—and putt-putt (if the kids had their way). My mom and Grandma tended to be the first to head up to the house. One time, mid-week, the kid group had finished a major sand castle effort for the day, and we grabbed the rafts and headed towards the water. Grandpa came with us and walked out into the surf with his strong bow-legged stance, just him against the waves and then, once past them and us, it was just him against the ocean. That day his swim would be more Hemingway-esque than ever.

I jumped with each rise in the waves and watched him disappear and reappear with each swell as he swam farther and farther out. And then I couldn’t see him any longer. We swam until the sand in our suits became unbearable, and then we went up to dry off in the late afternoon sun. I scanned the horizon and couldn’t see Grandpa. I asked my dad, and after scanning the water himself, he got Joe’s attention and they walked together up the beach, searching for a tiny bobbing head beyond the surf. We kids sat closer on the beach with Aunt Betty telling us what a strong swimmer her father was. He used to swim competitively, she said. He swam every chance he got, and he was in amazing shape. Never missed a day at the gym. But she was searching the water too while she talked. Up and down as the waves rolled in, tumbling over themselves to try to reach us. My dad and Uncle Joe were now walking the other way, towards the Northern pier. They weren’t strolling, but they weren’t running. They were walking with great intent, and it was a weird gait that was unfamiliar to me. We sat, now warm, sand and suit dry against our skin. My older sister took the younger two up to the house, and she would tell my mom that no one could find Grandpa and that he had been gone too long. But by the time my mom came jogging back down to the beach, we could see Dad and Uncle Joe walking slowly with Grandpa between them.
As they came into sharper focus, we could see blood covering Grandpa’s torso. William Russell ran to meet them. He hugged Grandpa even though it made Grandpa wince a bit. Dad said that there had been a riptide that carried Grandpa much further out. Grandpa, being the strong swimmer that he was, waited it out and then swam horizontally towards the north until he was free of the current, but as he started towards shore again, a new current pulled him in towards the pier, and he got into real trouble being bashed against the barnacle-covered pilings. Just by sheer will, Grandpa had finally made it to shore, but his hands, arms and torso were cut up badly, and he was exhausted—and likely very embarrassed. He was a man’s man in an era of men. So, he largely ignored everyone other than to confirm to his daughters that he was okay. It wasn’t until later that night, when I sat by Grandpa on the couch, that I felt brave enough to talk to him about what happened.

“I’m really sorry that your swim was so bad today. It was scary not being able to see you,” I said, as I tucked in close beside him.

He didn’t say anything.

“I kept thinking of what it would be like just to swim out and out to go so far that you can’t even see back. It would be so scary. Were you really scared?”

Grandpa looked at me and let out a breath. “I wasn’t too scared. I knew I could outsmart the riptide. And the pier hurt, but I was close enough then that I knew it would be okay. But then I felt one of them against my leg—just like you said. Rough and firm, like sandpaper. And I saw how my arms and hands were bleeding.”

My eyes grew large and my mouth dropped open. “Sharks?” I whispered.

“Yes. First one, and then another,” he said. “I know they were probably those little ones, but it was really something just the same.”
“All that blood,” I said, looking at the bandages on his arm and the open scratches on his hands.

“I don’t know why they didn’t bite. But I’ll be thinking about it when I go to sleep tonight.”

As did I.

When we took our walk the next morning, we saw the sharks lined up again on the beach. Still, heavy bodies, no longer slipping through the surf, playing tag with our ankles. Grandpa squatted down by one and stared at it, cocking his head a bit. The dead eye stared back with what looked like regret.

As with so many family vacations, by Thursday night, the excitement had worn off, and we found ourselves more and more irritated by the living conditions and the people—people we loved, but that we didn’t normally spend every waking minute with. Finding faults and digging in tended to happen more and more as the week came to close. And it wasn’t relegated to only kids or only adults. Everyone seemed to feel it. My mom and Grandpa would have had one too many political arguments. Betty and Grandma would be irritated with each other’s mothering skills—or lack thereof. We kids would be tired of losing card games and tired of being the one left behind—and we all felt we were the one left behind. We were also tired of sleeping on the floor—the flattened pillows and pink cotton blankets were of little comfort. So we would try to be nice but over the course of the week, it would become a front. The kids would start jockeying for more adult attention, and the older ones got it for being older and the youngest got it for being youngest, but the middle ones bitterly fought for the scraps. I wasn’t the oldest, even though I was only a year off from my sister and William Russell. But, like most kids with power, they
preferred not to share, and they inserted themselves into more grown-up conversations and told me to play with Maggie and David.

I found Maggie and David to be equally irritating, so I just read a lot instead during the downtime. David and I had a few things in common. We were both really good at card games, beating Grandma handily. We just had that competitive knack. We also were a little on the heavy side, but David more so than me, which made me feel superior to him (that competitive thing, again). But David could be very awkward and would sometimes rub everyone the wrong way or be too loud or just too much. Then he’d sulk when he got called out on it. But Aunt Betty couldn’t see it, and she’d always make sure he was included, but eventually her drinking would get in the way and she’d lose focus, and David would be ousted by the hierarchy of children. Even Amanda, my youngest sister, would ignore him when he would try to engage her in a fun game or puzzle. Aunt Betty and Uncle Joe would go to the porch to slow dance and smoke, and the kids would watch the one show that David begged us not to, and Mom and Dad would read, and Grandpa and Grandma would go to bed. And then it would be Friday.

Sometimes, however, the hierarchy fell apart a bit, and when that happened, the loser got an extra dose of humiliation. The loser was usually David. When Dad and I ran out to the store before dinner to grab a few forgotten items, Dad spied some Circus Peanuts in the checkout line. Peach colored and banana flavored. Soft and chewy with dimples in their foamy flesh. I’d never eaten one but intrinsically I knew what they tasted like and what texture they were—they were almost inedible, even to my family, and we worshipped all things sweet. I would eat a Hostess Snoball by peeling off the coconut marshmallow coating and saving it for last to be eaten alone, so I knew how to enjoy something gross, but those Circus Peanuts were beyond even me. Dad grabbed a bag anyway, plotting against his overweight nephew. He said, “I’ll bet you a dollar if I set these out, David will be the only one to eat them.” I laughed even though it was mean,
because what else are you going to do? It’s Dad. He’s talking to you. It’s special. Like a secret. Like we are friends.

Dad put them in a bowl on the Gin Rummy table, and it wasn’t long before David sniffed them out and started chowing down while everyone else turned up their noses. I didn’t want to blame him—the only other option was Grandma’s undercooked oatmeal cookies, but still—they were Circus Peanuts, the freakshow option in the candy aisle, and he was eating them, one after the other. Dad caught my eye and winked at me.

Dad was quiet a lot, but he could still be a lot of fun, and my sisters and cousins constantly vied for his attention. Dad played football on the beach with William Russell earlier that day. He took my younger sisters way out in the surf to where they couldn’t stand, and they held on so tightly and laughed as the waves roared past them. He and my oldest sister, who had joined the cross-country team, jogged down the beach that morning and were gone for an hour. And he bought Circus Peanuts with me to feed to my overweight cousin as a joke. I took what attention I could from my father, even though I stood on David’s wide shoulders to get it that day.

My dad wasn’t a mean person and that side showing was rare indeed. But after a week of family vacation, with uncles, aunts, cousins and three generations, we became rough to each other, insensitive and conniving. Our insecurities grew, and even the adults tried to find favor by shutting down the weak. I wonder if Dad did that to make himself feel better that I wasn’t like David, who had been getting on his nerves too, even though in so many ways, I was very similar to my cousin. But I didn’t eat those Circus Peanuts, and on day five, that was what counted most.

At the beginning of the week, I would look at Aunt Betty and Uncle Joe, with their swirl of Marlboro smoke and the smell of whiskey a constant on their breath, and I thought of them as outlaws. My parents were so tame in comparison, I couldn’t see them any other way. But Aunt Betty made it her job to love the ones that needed it the most that week and made us feel special
when everyone else wanted us to go away. Despite the booze and the pleadings by my parents to quit smoking in the beach house, she would dig in her heels. She’d just set her ashtray down next to her and tell me to come over, that she had a story for me, and I’d be there in a flash.

We had a few more summers of Virginia Beach vacations after that. Then my family started to go on bigger trips that were longer and included camping and then later, plane flights and hotels. Uncle Joe wasn’t so good with money after all, as they stopped even going to the beach. Their family became fractured as William Russell and Uncle Joe could no longer get along at all, and William Russell moved in permanently with my grandparents. But the partying continued for Betty and Joe for years afterwards. David grew older and wider, and he wanted to study archeology in college. Through it all the one constant for Betty and Joe was the drinking, which grew to a fever pitch when David took a shotgun to his head and pulled the trigger on his last day of high school as a senior. He had failed a class and was told he’d have to go back to summer school, and he just couldn’t bear the thought. That’s what we all wanted to think. But you don’t do *that* unless there is more. Unless there is a lifetime of small things that add up to nothing. You don’t do *that* unless they’ve winked behind your back and told you to go away too many times.

My mom can’t talk about it—other that the phone calls I got when it first happened, she’s never spoken to me about it. My mom had a rough early life, but Aunt Betty’s was always worse. It was so bad, my grandparents had to pick up the pieces and raise them as their own most days. None of it was fair to anyone, but their family was built and then it fell. In that small window when it was as strong as it would get, we met at Virginia Beach and had some fun. But in the end, we were all breathing on their house of cards with heavy breaths, causing the cards to flutter ever so slightly and doing nothing to help keep them safe.

A year after David died, my Uncle Joe and his foxy grin took the exact same path with the same gun as David had before. He didn’t want that life anymore—not without David. My
Aunt Betty found them both—first David and then Joe, cruelly on the first anniversary of David’
death. From then on, she did the only thing she knew to do—she drank, and she smoked until she
just couldn’t anymore. But still she loved me and made me think she loved me most.

We didn’t live close, and aside from the phone calls and one surprise package of lingerie
my Aunt Betty sent me when I got married, our only real memories are from the time we spent
together at the beach. Some of their decline I saw with my own eyes, as a child viewing a movie
that’s rated too adult for her age. I saw it and noted it, but couldn’t make sense of it. To me it was
just the way they were, and it made them exciting and special. I know those trips weren’t my
parents’ favorites. They liked to see new places, they preferred mountains to the beach, and they
struggled mightily with how Aunt Betty and Uncle Joe lived. But now that Betty, Joe, and David
are gone, the memories from those trips are hoarded like plunder. The bad parts slip away into
legend and the good parts shine like the July sun on Virginia Beach at 3 p.m.

Instead of the hard floor and the thin blanket and the undercooked cookies, the first
memories are seen through the nostalgic filter of memory. We laugh and joke and glow. And in
those memories, I can see David being wrapped in a towel by his mom on the beach. Him sitting
snuggled between her legs as she told us how Grandpa would be just fine. How his face lit up at
the sight of his dad helping to bring Grandpa back to us, after an adventure none of the rest of us
could survive. How he raced me back to the house afterwards so we could be the first to play Gin
Rummy.

If we had not taken those vacations, if my parents had said they didn’t like the beach
enough to share their vacation time and money, if dad had said he didn’t want to spend time with
the side of the family with extra baggage, if all the families hadn’t made that effort, then there
wouldn’t be any of those memories. Without those trips, all I would have is a vague recollection
of a distant cousin who came through town every once in a while, who sat silently with the other
kids and watched TV while the adults talked for the afternoon in a separate room, and who took
his own life before it had even begun. As well, I wouldn’t have known what it was like to be singled out for being extra loved—for being a favorite, if only for a few days. I also wouldn’t have known how much Aunt Betty and Uncle Joe loved each other, and that they weren’t just a couple that we had to bring out the dusty ashtrays for. A vacation like that doesn’t end when the week is up.

Without those trips, Aunt Betty wouldn’t have called me late at night, drunk and nostalgic, to reminiscence about our times together at the beach. Those times when our skin was dark in the sun, when Grandpa almost got nibbled to death by baby sand sharks, when David and I owned everyone in Gin Rummy, when Joe was alive and they danced without music, and when all the world around that little beach rental was right, even though the smoke was curling up towards the heavens even then.
CHAPTER 3

LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

Dad bought the Good Times Machine for $7,000 (a small fortune at the time) when I was 9. It was a customized van, a vehicle that had reached its zenith of cool in the 70s as an affordable housing and lifestyle choice for groovy people who liked to end up in parking lots for the night—maybe. I don’t know who else could have found value in such a relatively expensive and specific vehicle—other than our family of six who was listening to the call of the wild road. The Good Times Machine featured three tones of red inside—with red shag carpeting on the floor and the sides (yes, the sides) and red velvet on the ceiling. The seats were covered in a faux velvet that was also very red. The van’s interior was so red it was like looking into an open wound. The outside had very classy detailing in tan, brown and red striped patterns with “The Good Times Machine” airbrushed in large letters across the passenger side. The van had captains’ chairs for the driver and front passenger, behind those were two more captain’s chairs, and in the way back was a six-foot bench that pulled out into a bed. The van also had a removeable card table, with cupholders at each corner, which had a sharp metal pole that sank into the middle of the floor between the back captain’s chairs and the bench, providing both game space, comfort during eating, an effective gate for keeping younger sisters in the bench area, and a potential javelin when upended. The seatbelts in the back were extra-long and they draped onto the floor, making it hard to avoid getting caught in a net of perceived safety when moving about the vehicle. Dad took a boxcutter and removed them entirely from all of the children’s seats. The van was about comfort, not safety, and seatbelt laws were still only a glimmer in a politician’s eye.
The van was our third vehicle, after the Green Bean, a dark green Volvo station wagon that had made the trip from Denver to Kentucky when my parents moved back home, and a yellow, unnamed Volvo station wagon that had two rear seats in the way, way back for whoever was unlucky enough to be picked up last. As a family of six, we loved the extra space of the van, and I don’t ever remember a time when I was embarrassed of it, even though it was the equivalent of driving around in bright orange bellbottoms. But it was too big for daily driving, so Mom and Dad rarely drove it unless we were on vacation, although we would occasionally use it to go to church, parking at the back of the lot with the writing on the van facing away from the sanctuary’s windows.

My older sister, Sara, and I are 14 months apart. Sara was born in Louisville, Kentucky, then my parents moved to Memphis, then to Washington DC, then to Midway Island, then to Denver, and then to Danville, KY. All before Sara was five years old. I was born during the short Washington, DC, stint. My parents took a little break from moving and babies when they settled in Kentucky, but seven years after I was born, they had Maggie, and 3 years after that they had Amanda. So with 11 years’ difference between the oldest and youngest siblings, our family of six was complete.

Those first few years in Danville were focused on fixing up an old farmhouse, that held within its walls a log cabin from Kentucky’s pioneer days. Mom and Dad spent their extra time shoring up walls to keep the mice and snakes out. Then the two babies came along, so the focus turned to them. But it wasn’t too long after Maggie started walking that Mom started eyeing the U.S. map with intent, and it was about that time that Dad saw the ad for The Good Times Machine. By the time Amanda came onto the scene, The Good Times Machine was already a part of the family.

Our first trip in it was to Virginia Beach, and it was then that my parents noted how little temperature control we had in the van. The heat seeped in from the front tire wells and permeated
all the way back. But by occasionally cracking of all the windows and with the A/C on at full blast, we could stop the worst of the sweating. That trip was a short jaunt compared to what came later, as the next summer my mom and dad put the Good Times Machine to its first real test. It was a two-week summer vacation from Niagara Falls to New Hampshire to Vermont to Maine and then home. The driving part of the trip was over 2,500 miles and over 40 hours—all crammed in the van within eight feet of each other. But we survived and, like NASA eyeing the moon, Mom now felt emboldened to go where no Good Times Machine had gone before.

The follow summer’s trip—to Taos, Durango, Ouray and Colorado Springs—easily beat our record, with over 3000 miles traveled and almost 50 hours driving in the van. The numbers shock me now. Fifty hours is a full workweek plus 10 hours of overtime. Fifty hours is over two solid days of driving with no sleep at all—but, of course, we never drove straight through. We slept every night because my parents were exhausted. But like birds on migration, they were driven to find the next place to call home for a little while. Somehow, despite the exhaustion, they liked those 50 hours on the road. For them, the traveling days were a valuable part of the process. They took to heart the Harry Chapin lyrics from *Greyhound*: “It’s got to be the going and not the getting there that’s good.” Chapin was a favorite of my parents, and my mom, who doesn’t brag about much, will boast shamelessly about rushing Chapin after a concert in Boulder, CO, and giving him a hug. Chapin died in a car crash on my parents’ 15th wedding anniversary—the crystal one—in ’81, about a decade after my mom attacked him at the concert. Of Chapin’s death, Mom said, “I hope getting there was good enough for Harry this time.”

On our long driving days, we were unafraid to add hours to the journey. We stopped at diner after diner along the way, searching for pie whenever we could. All roadside attractions were fair game—world’s largest, best, tallest, most whatever—Dad would line us up in front of the thing or the sign, whichever was most impressive, and snap a pic on his Pentax ME 35 mm camera. Bathroom breaks were common, especially after Amanda wet her pants a few times.
There was no plan other than the line Dad had marked on the map, and even that was up for negotiation. There was no Google or Yelp to plan our trip around, so we had to wing it. When Mom and Dad got tired of driving at night, they’d start looking for a motel. Sometimes, they’d find one quickly, and sometimes it would be hours before they found a spot to stay. Even though we were a party of six, we never stayed in two rooms or a connecting room or a suite. My parents would order a roll-away bed and two doubles, and my little sisters would sleep toe-to-head in the rollaway, while I shared one of the double beds with Sara. We’d get to watch late night TV, and we’d all rotate through the shower, with Dad timing us so that we wouldn’t use up all the motel’s hot water, or so he said.

There were times that we would try to stop where there was a convention or a big festival or event, and there would be no rooms left anywhere for miles around. Still, Mom would try to talk Dad into checking out whatever was happening the next day, for fear that we were missing out on a fantastic opportunity. Sometimes it was worth backtracking for, like a hot air balloon festival, and sometimes it wasn’t, like the cattlemen convention of ’83. It must have been stressful for Mom and Dad when there was no room at the inn or no inn at all when they were both wiped out from driving all day, and it was dark and late. But we kids just fluffed up our pillows and fell asleep, sometimes barely registering the transition from van to motel room at 2 a.m. No showers then or brushing teeth. Just rolling into bed and yanking the covers once hard enough to establish control.

The boredom of the back of the van can’t be overstated during those long days on the road. It’s not hyperbolic to describe the soul-crushing, desolate despair one felt by day two of the driving part of the vacation. Later trips, I would bring Stephen King and James Michener novels (plural) to while away the time, but when I was younger, Trixie Beldon and Walter Farley books went too quickly, and then what? We would bring games that were fun the first day, but we were too crabby by the second day and the games often turned violent. We ate a tremendous amount of
snacks, with mom handing back Ritz crackers with individual Cheese Whiz designs on the first day, but by the second day, she would just throw a pack of Oreos back without turning around—a zookeeper throwing meat into the tiger cage.

Eyes ahead, Mom got to see everything—the green of the East melting into brown prairie, the flat plains erupting into the first shards of the Rockies, the mist of Niagara Falls rising above the skyline, the gentle rolling mountains in New England, and the rocky cliffs of Maine overlooking the sea. Meanwhile, in the back, we had two large grayed out windows on the driver’s side and one more in the far back on the passenger side. They weren’t terrible in terms of size, but they were so darkened that everything looked gloomy, like a Dickensian version of whatever Mom and Dad could see out the front.

We spent a lot of time bothering each other with the always fun I’m-not-touching-you game, jamming our feet into backs and onto armrests, and fighting desperately over the captain’s chair behind the driver’s seat. It was the favorite because it had a big window, it was an actual chair and not a bench, it had a view of the front, and it could swivel so that you could put your back to everyone and pretend they didn’t exist. A mom in the 2000s would have made a sharing chart so that we all got a fair turn, but it was the early 80s, so we just turned feral and tried to dib on it, then race for it, and then pull hair for it, leaving someone in tears after every stop. One particularly conniving trick was to steal the best seat by alertly lying in wait until the sister in the prime spot leaned too far forward—perhaps asking Mom for a Coke or requesting a bathroom stop—and then you could make your big move. If you were quick enough, you could jump in behind her, settle yourself in a flash, and then use your feet to gently persuade (aka kick) her completely out of the chair. When done with finesse, you could win it every time, because possession was everything. No amount of howling would make my parents turn around in their seats; it was our own version of Lord of the Flies in the back of that van. Once a sister had overthrown the top spot, the other three would be in code-red mode, eyeing her with distrust until
a peace offering was made—a Swiss Cake Roll perhaps, or an offer to play Spoons. But even when it was rough in the wilds of red shag land, at least it broke up the monotony.

The thing I remember doing the most during those endless hours, however, was watching my horse out the window. I, like so many young Kentucky girls, loved horses in that particular way that is more romantic than realistic. To wit: The horse that I imagined was released at highway speed from a trailer that traveled with us wherever we went. Totally realistic. This horse was able to run so fast that he would keep up with us on the side of the highway, jumping fences with ease, rounding billboards, and managing exits without issue. Again, shockingly realistic. The horse was usually black (a nod to Walter Farley’s *The Black Stallion*) with specific white markings that changed regularly. The horse’s name was significant. I spent a lot of time watching this imaginary horse and trying to think of the perfect name—Thunder. Thor. Prince. Magic. Apollo. Devil. Storm. I would mouth them or whisper them quietly until a sister, usually Sara, would kick me to be quieter and less weird.

As a parent now, I cannot think of one instance where my children have been that bored. They’ve been bored, of course. They’ve had to watch shows they had already seen many times or that they had no interest in. They’ve gotten tired of doing something and have switched to something else. They’ve fallen asleep out of sheer will when there wasn’t a screen available to them. But they have also never driven 50 hours in a van. They have never stared out the window so long that they imagine their best dreams coming to life, running alongside them to keep them company, all while waiting to be named.

Boredom like we experienced when I was young brought out weirdness, quirkiness, violence, and sometimes intense hilarity. I can’t effectively share those moments of hilarity in any kind of detail because they were not, in fact, hilarious. But the longer we were in the van, the more likely we were to get slap happy and laugh with such intensity, purpose, and gusto that we wouldn’t be able to stop until the muscles in our stomachs cramped, and then we’d wipe the tears
from our faces and giggle softly until we got lost again in the tedium. There was no rhyme or reason to what would set us off—it could be a mildly amusing reply, a particularly bad fart, someone trying to cheat during a game, or, even better, a failed attempt to steal the best captain’s chair. But once one of us was laughing, we were all laughing. It was a release that allowed us a moment to reset and refocus. Then Maggie would start playing Solitaire, Amanda would start placing her stuffed animals just so on the bed in the back, Sara would paint her fingernails, and I would stare out the window again, eventually mouthing out names—Cyclone, Fury, Sultan, Reign.

Most of our travels in The Good Times Machine were a blend of camping and cramming into motel rooms. We would camp for two or three days, and then find a motel room to catch up on sleep and real showering. It was a way to save money, see more of the places we had traveled to, and eat lots of Dinty Moore beef stew cooked over a fire. The camping part was mostly terrible, s’mores aside. Perhaps the worst part was how long it could take for mom to find a camping spot that passed muster. My Mom, who had experienced great poverty at points in her childhood, including the use of chamber pots and outhouses, would not stay at campgrounds without a clean bathhouse. The pattern was this: We would find a campground via road signs or the AAA TripTik—a 1980s technologically advanced travel information system (aka a notebook), and then Dad would sheepishly ask at the front office if we could drive through the campground to check the bathrooms and available sites. Most of the time, they would let us, and we would drive straight to the bathhouse. Mom would get out by herself with her children shielding their faces in the dark recesses of the van. She would come back out either smiling or with a distinctive frown largely driven by what was clearly an unpleasant odor. If the bathhouse resulted in a smile, then we would take a quick drive through the campground to see which camp sites were still available. We’d drive on if the only available spots were in the open fields close to the office. But when the stars aligned, we got the good bathhouse and the spot right on the water, with big trees
close and grass for soft sleeping. The back of the van was full of primal bitching and moaning during this vetting process, but the fact was we only had a limited window for each vacation and every night and day outside of the van counted. So, it was Mom’s demanding selectivity that kept us from gagging on late night trips to the can and from broiling at the campsite during the day with no tree cover. But sometimes it didn’t pay off, like when we arrived too late in the day to find any open campgrounds at all, and we’d have to take whatever bathroom and camp site we could find. We’d put up the tents in a state of utter failure, and head to the closed beach to shamefully sneak in for a quick dip to avoid the showers before bed.

The Good Times Machine was always home base when we camped, and when it wasn’t moving, it offered many extra amenities. Once Dad took the Sears X-Cargo cartop carrier off the top of the van, the white roof was a paradise for tanning and for seclusion. Maggie and Amanda were too little to climb up, and Sara would never choose to come up when I was there—we spent enough time together to beg for more. It was like a clubhouse with a hot metal floor. We all took turns hanging out in the driver’s seat as well, pretending to be older, and with the door open the inside didn’t feel as claustrophobic, so we were just as likely to hang out there as we were anywhere else. But the van had some qualities that couldn’t be overlooked for much longer, and the temperature control was at the top of the list.

“Why is it so cold,” was the new “Are we there yet?,” when we skated through New York state on our first—and last—winter family vacation in the Good Times Machine, a vehicle that, while not lacking in soft internal trim materials, seemed to be lacking actual physical barriers to the outdoor weather. We were on our way from Kentucky to Gore Mountain to go skiing and the temperature kept falling and falling, which would normally not be a concern, except that there was a direct funnel of outside air coming from the front foot panels, as if they were made of mesh rather than solid steel. There were no foot warmers, no seat warmers, and the heater was only able to offer a light wisp of warmth from the few blowers in the back of the van.
My parents were getting concerned. They shoved sweatshirts and blankets under their feet to try to stop the cold from rushing in. The gas pedal, clutch and brake were unsafely swaddled, but dad was cold and made it work anyway. We drove through the snow of Syracuse and then hit a wall of cold that we were unaccustomed to. We found out later that it was -10 degrees outside. We put on winter jackets and mittens and boots, and we sat and shivered inside the van while it roared down the icy highway. The Cokes in the van were frozen, as were the M&Ms that you had to suck on to thaw. We had already been in the van for over 10 hours, and Mom and Dad were exhausted and unsure of how much further they could drive in those conditions. So we stopped at a motor lodge for the night in Rome,NY. We walked in a huddle to the motel’s lobby—gone was our swagger during summer vacations. We stood close and shivered without talking. Mom and Dad were worse off—Mom’s feet had to be warmed up slowly in the bath, and it was so painful when they came back to life that she cried. We limped into Gore Mountain the next day and stayed in the lodge until the severe cold snap had passed. Our trepidation about getting back into the Good Times Machine to travel back home at the end of that trip laid the groundwork for the biggest shake up to our summer vacations that we had ever seen. That next summer, we got fancy.

In 1986, Dad sold The Good Times Machine and bought our second used van, The Cherry Bomb. The Cherry Bomb, which wore its name on the front license plate as if it was a christened ship, was The Good Times Machine on steroids. It was bigger, with a lifted roof, and had more room for luggage in the very back. The finishes were nicer, but it still felt just like home because it too was three tones of red on the inside, a welcoming womb that arrived already smelling a bit like McDonalds. The Cherry Bomb also had a cassette tape player that worked, which was a revelation to us all. We hadn’t even realized how terrible it had been to listen to mom searching over and over again for any radio station that would cut through the static. We had listened to big band stations that cut in and out without even realizing what it felt like to just
put in a tape of your choosing. Mom and Dad preferred Paul Simon’s Graceland and, surprisingly, George Michael, while the girls in the back went on PR campaigns for Rick Springfield and Michael Jackson. The tape deck would sometimes overheat, and we’d be back to the radio, but it was still a vast improvement. In addition to a working tape deck, we were also technological frontrunners when Dad installed an auto-friendly TV/VCR combo. By “installed,” I mean that Dad took the small 9” TV set from the kitchen and placed it on the living room’s JVC VCR and snuggled them both on the floor between the front two seats in the van, facing backwards, with a little duct tape added for stability. It was exorbitant, innovative, and worthy of trademarking, which we might have done if we could have torn ourselves away from the tiny screen on the floor at the front of the van. You couldn’t hear it well, due to the highway noise, but we usually played tapes we had already seen 10s of times, so we made do. We watched The Parent Trap, Annie, The Neverending Story, Swiss Family Robinson, The Dark Crystal, and The Black Stallion, and, except for the last one, none of them lost too much in translation to the 9” screen.

The Cherry Bomb was a refuge for us all, despite our general disgust at being trapped in it for so long on the driving days. It was a shelter when the rain deluge ran under the tents in the campground, and it was a delight when we swiveled the captain’s chairs to the center and played game upon game, high on Grape Crush and Nilla Wafers. We assumed it as steadfast and secure as any vehicle could be. But road-trip style traveling with lead-footed Mom at the wheel took a toll, and The Cherry Bomb was about to remind us that it too had a breaking point.

We were headed to Steamboat Springs, Colorado, and had gone over Loveland Pass, avoiding the Eisenhower Tunnel because Mom always preferred the scenic route. It was on the downhill that we first noticed an acrid smell. Dad blamed it on the old car in front of us, and we travelled on, with the smell getting stronger. After hooking right in Silverthorne, we noticed the smell was entirely gone. Feeling confident, Dad started up Rabbit Ears pass, with Mom making
sure we all looked up long enough to see the basalt rocks that formed the Rabbit Ears overlooking the highway. Dad pointed out the “Watch for Falling Rocks” signs and told the lame dad joke that the sign was for a Native American child named Falling Rocks who was missing, and we should keep our eyes peeled in case we saw him. We crested the pass and began the descent into Steamboat Springs.

My sisters and I all felt an electric surge vibrating through us because we were almost at our destination. Without any more prompting from Mom and Dad, we swiveled our seats towards the windows and stared out into the scenery flying by. Usually upon arrival, the van door would swing open like a curtain on the Price is Right—and before us would be the prize we had been driving 25 hours to see. We were ready for the big reveal, but within minutes of the descent, the acrid smell was back. Within a few more minutes, smoke started filling the van. There was no turn off, no shoulder, no place to go but downhill. Dad geared down and tried to be as gentle as he could with the brakes, with mom terrified they would catch on fire. It was a real possibility. Rabbit Ears Pass boasts a near-vertical drop of over 2,400 feet and covers 7.5 miles, and we smoked down every single one of them. The Cherry Bomb had smoke coming from the wheel wells and the windows as it rolled into the first service station that Dad saw; we looked like the ticking bomb that we were. Mom immediately unloaded our suitcases, still scared the whole thing would go up in flames.

We all stood and looked at the van while Dad talked to the mechanic. As it sat there on the crumbling asphalt with smoke still wafting up from below, the van was somehow both sinisterly traitorous and weakly pathetic. We immediately felt naked without it as our home base, and we ended up having to leave it behind for almost a week, while the garage ordered parts and waited for them to arrive. Dad drove it more tentatively after that, but it was Mom with her lead foot that ignored the past and took the Cherry Bomb roaring off again into future adventures. With each mile we took on and each mountain we crested, we all learned to trust the van as our
sanctuary again, and as the smell of smoke lifted, we stared out of the windows without another thought to the machine propelling us along those twisting roads leading us to the next stop on the map.

Sanctuary or no, with six bodies in it for 20 hours at a time, the van would get rank by the end of our journey. The strongest smell to me was always the Juicy Fruit and Wrigley’s Spearmint gum, my parents’ mainstays. There was also a constant smell of newspaper, as whichever parent was sitting in the passenger side would often be holding one open in front of the A/C and reading out loud to the driver. Add to that the unctuous undertones of fast food, and the bodily smells that followed. Remaining hints of past pants-wetting instances, and damp shag carpet left over from raining day excursions gave the entire space a familiar, if unpleasant, scent with an accompanying neutral dry down. That is to say, that it stunk when you first crawled into the van, and then you wouldn’t think of it again until the next entry.

The van was the central figure to our summer trips, but when we traveled to the Boundary Waters in Minnesota, we were forced to rely only on ourselves for transportation. This trip was unique because Mom hadn’t pointed to this spot on the map; instead, it was Dad who pushed for the location. Dad had fond memories of when he was a camp counselor at Camp Pet-O-Se-Ga, and canoeing was a big part of that experience, so when he heard of a place for canoe enthusiasts where there were no cars, no motorboats, and no help, he naturally thought to bring his four untested-by-nature daughters and his wife who preferred a nice, clean bathhouse. We drove to Ely, Minnesota, and got outfitted for four days and three nights in the Boundary Waters. The Ely Outdoor Outfitters gave us everything we needed for the trip, and we were still woefully unprepared.

The Boundary Waters track along the US-Canada border and are made up of 1000 lakes and streams all connected by short passageways. The official Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness is immense, with over one million acres filled with nothing but nature—and people
who love to paddle—like my Dad. While we had camped quite a bit by that point, we had never camped without the van parked close by—and without a bathroom and showers handy. So the idea of packing in and packing out was new and scary to everyone but Dad. The other concern was that Mom couldn’t swim at all. She was comfortable wading to knee height, and she was comfortable in a non-motorized boat if she had a life jacket on, which seemed really brave to me. Other than those two options, she wasn’t interested in anything water related. When she lived on Midway Island, she never went out in the water past her knees, and when we went to the Eastern shore she never cooled off once in the surf. But here she was getting ready to spend four days floating around with a life preserver strapped on tight like a straight jacket. Lacking access to a bathroom and shower posed a challenge to us all, but for mom it was almost a deal breaker. But she was a trooper, according to Dad. According to Mom, Dad was something else entirely.

Sara and I had learned to canoe on trips to New England, so we had a basic understanding of J strokes, but no one would have known that by the skills we displayed early on during the Boundary Waters trip. While Dad would have his canoe on a perfectly straight path across a lake, Sara and I would serpentine and bolt and circle, more like bear cubs bumbling behind their mother and less like every other serious paddler in the Boundary Waters. I even beached my canoe once—into a grassy, mucky area, and it was so gross having to get out to push the canoe back into deep water that I quickly adjusted my paddling. Nothing promotes improvement more than having to step into watery sludge. Over the four days of the trip, Sara and I got the hang of the direct route and became skilled J-stroke paddlers. Maybe “skilled” is too strong a word there. I’ll use “adequate” instead.

At the outfitters in Ely, they had given us a laminated map with a red line marked on it, showing us how to get through the maze of lakes and waterways, where to portage, and general areas to camp. The main guide back in Ely had also highlighted some of the very best camping spots and told us to try to get to these sites early because they would fill up the quickest. Mom
became obsessed with those starred spots. Perhaps to take her mind off peeing in the woods, she focused instead on the camp site with the flat rock that jutted out into the water, or the spot with a shallow rock-rimmed pool right off of a grassy lawn. We arrived early to each one and hoarded it, with Mom smiling at those paddlers that floated up too late and too unlucky to enjoy the prime real estate. She hadn’t showered in three days, but by God she had the best campsite that night, and that was worth something.

Despite there being no technology, no amenities, and very close quarters in the canoes and tents, all of us—including Mom—were more relaxed in the Boundary Waters. All of our normal moaning that we did in the van vanished, and we took our cues from the waters themselves—deep, dark, and cool. We scouted for birds and fish and bear, seeing plenty of the former two and none of the later, although we hung our food up high in a tree branch every night just in case. We didn’t have to scout for moose, as we almost ran into them while paddling through a grassy inlet. We took pleasure in the small challenges that faced us every day. My sisters and I loved bathing at dusk, for example. The sun would dip down and we would get a bit chilly after sweating all day. We would put our bathing suits on and take a quick dip in the inky water. Then we would go back on land, soap and shampoo ourselves with abandon, and then hurl ourselves back into the cold lake to rinse and then dry off, watching our bubbly shadows disappear in the water.

Being on the lookout for animals, having to paddle, or being able to trail your fingers into the water, leaving little Cheeto-powdered fingerprints swirling behind you, made every mile we traveled more interesting. The boredom of the back of the van was almost gone. But as calming as the water was, we still found ways to ratchet up the tension and make fools of ourselves in the process.

Mom never wanted to steer, preferring to sit in the front and tell the skipper where to go, and Maggie and Amanda were of no help whatsoever because they were still so young, so the
three of them traded Dad’s, mine, and Sara’s canoes whenever they wanted a change of pace. It didn’t really matter much except for the pictograph incident, when Mom and I were in a canoe together. After this incident, Mom and I no longer paired up. Let me set the scene for the incident in a totally biased way: The pictographs had been drawn on granite slabs hundreds of years ago. The bald eagles that were dive bombing the water were the first bald eagles we’d seen—and, did I mention they were dive-bombing the water? I was steering so I was moving us closer to the eagles for a better view. Mom was complaining because she wanted to see the ancient pictographs immediately. So we ignored all of the peace and calm, and, in the middle of that beatific watery retreat, my Mom and I screamed at each other, breaking the silence all around us. I J-stroked towards the eagles, and she paddled harder and faster towards the pictographs, so we circled and circled, yelling and yelling. At some point, we became aware of not only Dad, Maggie, Sara, and Amanda watching, but also other paddlers—none of whom we had seen before. Right after that, I noticed that the eagles had gotten wise and left the vicinity. We were late to our preferred camp site that night and had to take second best, which turned out to be a blessing because it had a small rope swing that everyone who liked to swim got to enjoy.

During those few days we traveled as we had never traveled before. Being so intimate with nature for that four-day stretch was unlike anything any of us had done before, including Dad. We felt calm and invigorated at the same time as we paddled those last few strokes through quiet glades on our way back to Ely. After parking the red canoes that had taken us so far in the wilderness and back again, we hauled out backpacks out and walked to The Cherry Bomb, which stood a bit humbled by the evergreens towering overhead. We hovered a bit outside of the door, not sure we wanted to leave the quiet reverie of the Boundary Waters. But then Dad pulled the door wide, and we all slid in, breathing deep the scent of gum, fast food, and urine, and, like water off a duck’s back, the peaceful calm slid away, and we were ourselves again.
As Sara and I got older and went to college and then beyond, the Cherry Bomb got used less and less, until finally Dad sold it to a neighbor who wanted to use it to transport furniture. The neighbor took the back captain’s chairs and bench out and stripped out the red carpet but left the soft ceiling panels in place. It served him well for a while, but then the neighbor reported that on a trip to Tennessee, the Cherry Bomb began to smoke and fill with a bitter smell. He was able to pull over on the side of the highway and get out quickly, before it burst into flames and burned to a blackened shell on the side of the road. I’m glad it saved its best for us.

When Dad first told me about the Cherry Bomb’s demise, I felt a real loss, thinking of such a beloved thing being carted away to a landfill. But I hadn’t even known where the Good Times Machine ended up, and I could picture someone ditching it on the side of the road in some icy Northern state, preferring to just face the elements head on, rather than die a slow death in the frozen confines of the Good Times Machine. In retrospect, I think that the Cherry Bomb had a fitting ending, perhaps choosing to go down in the proverbial blaze of glory instead of continuing to haul inanimate objects that didn’t belong in its beating heart of an interior. Because despite the drudgery of those massive road trips when I was young, my family was held together in ways that we never could have been if we hadn’t owned those trashy but beautiful vans.

We shared space for hours on end, without escape, and we fought, laughed, and daydreamed all while learning to love each just a little bit more. A minivan doesn’t encourage the connection that the large conversion vans did, there is no game playing or swiveling to ward off a foot attack. Flying is more about the strangers around you than the people you are flying with, and it’s far too quick to leave a mark on your soul. RVs are too big, allowing you to avoid each other just enough to keep the full connection at bay. But the Good Times Machine and the Cherry Bomb were perfect for following those lines on the map that took us on rambling tours across the nation, while giving us miles and hours to fall deeply into that red shag space and find connections that still stand strong today. Connections that could only be found during those
moments of bliss, boredom, and terror that punctuated our Jackson family vacations. So as the Cherry Bomb ignited in one final flash of brilliance, I imagine the smells of gum and fast food going up in smoke, red flames rushing against red velvet, and an still unnamed black horse standing on the side of the road next to a billboard, watching the van burn and then turning to trot back home to me.
CHAPTER 4

THE WORST TRIP

Almost every night at dusk, my husband, the kids, and I would wander to the beach and sit on the white sand to watch the sunset, like just about everyone else staying at the resort. We would find a patch of hot sand and sit back, watching the water and sky explode into a volcanic eruption of colors before the sun called it a day. Then came my favorite part: When both sky and sea darkened with only glimmers left of the fireworks show, and when the water was calm and the sky was ethereal and they blended and became slick like ice, melting into each other. I would imagine walking out on that smooth, sparkling surface to the liquid horizon, being one with both water and air. But by the end of this vacation—what was to be our last—I knew that it was all a mirage. That what looked like magic was only oblivion, lasting a few short moments before darkening into night.

The Perseids meteor shower happened on our second-to-last night on that trip. That evening, we stayed longer than usual, far past dusk, until the sky was inky, and the stars stood out as beacons for the galaxies beyond. The kids waited until the sand cooled and then dug deep trying to find the heat again. We laid back and eventually the kids calmed and took up spots beside us. We waited, staring into the darkness until it hurt, and I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I saw my first dazzling streak slicing through the velvet black. The kids squealed in delight, and we lay there side-by-side, watching the universe show off. Then my husband’s arm fell to his side onto the sand, and it brushed my forearm. He didn’t move it and let it stay, sending a jolt through me—not of electricity but of warning. Had it been so long since his arm grazed mine? Before I could think whether to let my arm travel millimeters more to encourage the touch,
my husband got up off the sand abruptly, spraying it on the rest of us. The kids complained and
the moment was broken, as it had been over and over again for a year. The warning was clear:
The vacation hadn’t worked as I thought, and night had come to stay.

Despite my long history of family vacations, my husband, Denny, and I didn’t take many
with just our two kids, although we did travel with my parents and sisters every summer. But solo
vacations were too expensive, and we were constantly low on cash and high on credit, and neither
of us made enough to make much of dent in either of those problems. But when our youngest,
Owen, had just hit double digits, Denny won the inheritance lottery when his only aunt died and
left a tidy sum behind. To many it wouldn’t have been a life-changing sum, but for us it a
significant haul. So we paid some bills and basked in the black for a bit. Then, naturally, I
decided we needed to go on vacation. And not just any vacation: Because we had been deprived
for so long, I wanted a top-of-the-line vacation for the four of us—something we had never gone
on before, nor would likely ever go on again. I was out of practice with planning family vacations
and felt rich, a combination that wouldn’t serve me well. Denny was on-board for the most part,
although he was worried about missing work.

We battled a bit over where to go and ended up deciding on Islamorada in the Florida Keys,
largely because we had just finished watching the TV show Bloodline, which was filmed there.
Looking back, I’m relieved that Ozark or Schitt’s Creek weren’t out yet, or the vacation would
have been even worse. To be clear, not only did we go to Islamorada, but we stayed at the actual
luxury resort where the TV show was filmed—the beautiful Moorings Village and Spa. The
Bloodlines’ location is pure eye candy, but the storyline is all about demons and darkness tearing
a family apart. I should have paid more attention to the plot rather than the setting.

Upon arrival, before putting our luggage in our villa, we ran out to the beach to take in the
white sand, palm trees, and ocean view. It was just as spectacular as it had been in the show—
even better, of course, because we were there. The kids kicked off their shoes and ran immediately to the water, but as they stepped in, they recoiled and ran back.

“It’s hot. Like really hot,” Lily, our oldest, said.

“And muddy. And it smells gross,” added Owen.

Denny and I walked to the edge of the water and looked out onto the Straits of Florida. The waters were perfectly still without a ripple in sight, and they were impossibly blue stretching out in front of us, but there was a strip of about twenty to thirty feet directly next to the white sand that was murky and the blue was lost to translucent, tea-stained water. Moreover, the water was matted with thick seaweed and a stench hung over the beach that complemented the flies buzzing low over the water. It turned out our beach was just trucked-in sand, and the dichotomy of the swamps of the Florida inland and the bright sand beaches of the peninsula’s coast clashed on our resort’s shore, as it tried to be something it wasn’t, failing and succeeding in equal measure.

Denny took his shoes off and stepped into the water, hopping back out quickly.

“Yes—it’s hot!” he said.

So, there we stood taking in the beautiful, brightly colored villas behind us, the palm trees blowing in the tropical breeze, the gorgeous cerulean waters stretching out in front of us, and the swamp that lay at our feet. My husband didn’t make eye contact with me before he started back to the car to unpack. The kids followed him, asking if they could pull their swimsuits out first so they could go to the pool. And I stood at the edge of paradise and stepped into the fetid waters at my feet, sliding into hot, sandy mud, with seaweed wrapping itself around my ankles as I stumbled out into the muck, and I wished that Denny was still beside me, walking towards that impossible blue.
Denny had had a terrible year. His father had died from liver failure, and Denny was struggling with the loss. But Denny had never been a great communicator—he could talk about anything on the surface, but anything just below would make him jittery. He’d furrow his brow and purse his lips, and then usually say something clichéd and leave the conversation. Once, when I asked him if he was worried about the kids not remembering their grandfather, Denny responded after a long pause, with a deeply furrowed brow and tight lips, “Well, a picture is worth a thousand words, and we have plenty of those.” Then he walked away, feeling like he had dug deeply into his psyche to work through the thought.

The ebbs and flows of over 20 years of marriage had settled into a comfortable tidal pattern for us to float upon, but that year had upset the flow, and Denny retreated into the ebbing. He had become much quieter and less connected, but at the same time he had been working on himself. He had taken up running, lost weight, and become fanatical about photography. He was also working hard on the next promotion at work, and I chalked it all up to processing the death of his father, who had been overweight and unhealthy and who always made Denny feel like a professional failure. I was certain that Denny just needed time to reclaim this new sense of self that had to be forged without a father figure to lead the way. We had gone through plenty of difficult times, and I knew Denny. This was just one of those low times, and we would pop up again soon like a buoy after the swell, and somehow be better for it.

Throughout my life, family vacations have made whole what was torn, strengthening connections and finding new common ground and just generally relieving stress—even silly childhood stresses and even if I was sick for most of the trip. So, I was expecting great things from this vacation. The only time we could travel was in early August, and despite the warnings about the heat and humidity, I romanticized it. I pictured Denny’s heart melting and softening in the Florida sunshine. I saw him letting go of the extra workload for the week and being present again, if only because it would be too hot to think of anything else. But instead, the heat only
made him tenser. He became more focused on work, talking about it when he wasn’t pulling out his laptop to check on a few things. He would go on long runs for hours every morning and come back soaking wet and exhausted. We’d be all ready to start the day together, and he’d bristle at the idea that he was holding us up. It was his vacation too—and he’d be doing as he liked, he said. But I was still sure the cure would work, and by the end of the week we’d be seeing glimmers of his old, funny, carefree self instead of this cold caricature of someone I used to know.

The Keys were not at all like I expected them to be. I pictured one tropical island after another filled with long stretches of beaches, dotted with restaurants with wide porches and large margarita glasses. Instead, I found them to be largely made up of one long road surrounded by water—swampy bay water to the north and gorgeous ocean water to the south—and each side of the road was buffered from nature by narrow strip malls and regularly interrupted by bridges. There was no charm to be found until you hit Key West, which we did on our last day there. Although our resort was lovely, it too was surrounded by strip malls that were filled with t-shirt shops and those selling shells, baskets of shells, picture frames with shells, bowls of shells, soap that looked like shells, and mounted shells. There also weren’t beaches—there were a few here and there, but no long stretches of sand exist in the Keys. To be fair, I had read about there being few beaches before we left, but it was still surprising to see it for ourselves. But we tried to make up for those shortcomings by planning day trips to keep us busy.

One day we went to a dolphin rescue, which was largely a waste of money and time, but we did get to see dolphins up close and the kids got to touch them. It took forever to drive to—the main road in the Keys was always packed, and once we got there it was like getting a quick behind-the-scenes tour behind a dolphin show tank at Sea World. It was fine—in that way “fine” is the response every teenager gives about every question you ask. But it wasn’t a main act or a main attraction. There were just some sad dolphins swimming around and around. But kids got to
touch the sad dolphins, which made the kids happy and the dolphins seemed to like the fish they got after being petted, so that was something. Lily bought a necklace with the exact tail markings of the dolphin she got to pet at the gift store, which took up the bulk of our time at the rescue.

Another day, we hired a guide boat to explore Florida Bay and the Straits of Florida. We spent the entire morning puttering around the mangroves in Florida Bay, bird watching and hoping to catch sight of the elusive America saltwater crocodile. We saw cormorants, which looked like Southern cousins of the loons we knew so well in the Northeast when the cormorants were in the water but were unsettling when we saw them nesting in vast numbers in the trees overhead, like Edward Gorey-style vultures waiting en masse. We saw spoonbills and egrets wading near the muddy shores, and we saw bald eagles, pelicans, and an osprey in a massive nest on a channel marker. We saw hundreds of turtles and glimmers of fish flitting through the brackish water. The crocodiles stayed out of sight, but our guide assured us that they were around, likely watching us as we crept through the dark beauty of the swamp trees.

After a long morning sweeping around the mangroves, with their tangled fingers of tree roots reaching into the liquid depths and caging the piscine spirits below, our guide pulled back the throttle and turned us towards the open water of the Straits of Florida. It was time to snorkel in the clear blue waters to the south of the Keys. The guide knew of a few great spots that he thought wouldn’t be overrun by larger guide boats, the kids were excited to test their new snorkeling skills, and Denny and I were ready to be in the water rather than by or on it.

So we jetted out over the reefs, feeling the hot, stifling weather at our backs, letting the sweat dry as we made our way parallel to the islands for a long time before our guide turned directly out to sea. The guide didn’t seem to be paying attention to any GPS or nautical map, but instead just kept his eyes on the horizon and then, without a sign or buoy or marker, he just shouted out, “We’re here!” and let loose of the throttle.
As soon as the boat slowed, Denny tightened his life jacket and pulled his fins on, adjusted his mask and snorkel and by the time the guide had stopped the boat, Denny was stepping off the back end and into clear blue water. The kids tried to follow but fumbled with the gear and needed help getting it adjusted. Then Lily stepped off, while Owen balked, waiting for me to get my stuff on so we could hold hands while we jumped. Once in the water, I relaxed, while my son tensed up. It took him a few minutes to adjust to the snorkel and get some water out of his mask. Lily treaded water nearby watching us from just under the water, posing as the crocodile we never saw. Denny swam up quickly and pulled his snorkel out to say that he had just seen a turtle and that we should follow him, then he was gone. Lily tried to follow but kicked back when she couldn’t catch up and waited for me and Owen, again. Finally, we set off, holding hands just to stay close, as the surface was just rough enough to unsettle Owen. But the kids got more confident as we went, and as soon as they got the rhythm right—breathing deep on the surface and then diving down, blowing out and tilting back to clear the snorkel as they surfaced again—they let go and we made some headway. But still Denny stayed just ahead, sometimes looking back and pointing to something before kicking hard to get more distance. We saw loads of bright fish, and Denny had just indicated a turtle up ahead when Owen grabbed me by my upper arm and pulled me up to the surface, sputtering when he got to the top.

“Something bit me,” he screamed with the waves now a little higher.

I spat out my snorkel: “Bit you? Where? Where did it bite you?”

“It stings, Mom. It really hurts. It’s on my leg,” he said, trying to pull his leg up to the surface and failing because of the ungainly fin on his foot.

He was crying, and I said, “It stung you? Or bit you?” I was still trying to understand as I reached to pull his leg up above the water.

Then Lily grabbed onto my shoulders, hoisting herself half out of the water.
“Mom—something stung my back. It hurts!”

She was panicky as she said it.

I held my breath and ducked under again, twirling around 360 degrees, which forced both kids to let go for a moment and also gave me a panoramic view of the massive jellyfish swarm that had floated in behind us and now stretched out between us and the boat.

I popped back up and both kids grabbed back on—both were crying.

I looked around for Denny and screamed his name into the waves, then I felt my first sting. I turned towards the guide boat and screamed, “Jellyfish!” to get his attention. Then I told both kids to put their snorkels back in and to kick—hard! Lily did while Owen stayed hooked onto me, trying to kick as I did and making it exponentially more difficult to make progress.

Instead of motoring towards us, the guide dropped the ladder in and stood watching us try to swim. And swim we did, through gelatin orbs whose fairy-like touches from their floating, feathery tentacles felt of burning pins and needles.

Lily was the first to reach the boat and explain what happened—the guide hadn’t heard me yell but had seen us swimming back. By the time Owen and I made it to the ladder, the guide had already doused Lily with vinegar and was ready to pour it over Owen and I. We were all covered in red welts, but Owen had gotten the worst of it, and it took him a long time to stop shaking and crying. That’s also how long it took for Denny to make it back to the boat, with stories of turtles, rays, and eels—and a huge jellyfish swarm he saw from a distance as it headed in towards shore.

As Denny settled onto the bench at the stern and stopped talking about his adventures, I asked him, “Will you look at us? We had to swim through the jellyfish. We are covered in stings.” I motioned to Owen’s leg that looked like a Mardi Gras aftermath, with red necklaces of raised welts tangled on his skin where the tentacles were wrapped around him. I was talking through
clenched teeth, not wanting to shout and make a scene while also wanting to grab Denny by the shoulders and scream as loudly as I could directly into his face.

Denny swiveled towards us and took us in: Owen’s tear stained face. Lily’s jaw set with lip still trembling. The marks of the jellyfish on our arms and legs.

“I smelled the vinegar,” he said distractedly. “Those will go away by the time we are back to shore. Did you all see the turtles?” He motioned for Owen to come sit by him, but Owen stayed put.

When your spouse drifts that far away, it feels impossible to get their attention. Like a deaf dog, there is no amount of screaming that pulls them back to where you can communicate again. It’s ghosting before they are gone, and there was nothing I could yell, or plead, or cry, or whisper that would have gotten Denny to snap out of the fog. So I let it go and stared out to sea, my eyes tearing up behind my sunglasses.

The Friday before we left, we went on a day trip to Key West, where we took in the madness of Mallorey Square; the impossibly charming and vibrant Old Town; Ernest Hemingway’s feline paradise and museum; the claustrophobic and acrophobic nightmare known as the Key West Lighthouse, the southernmost most spot in the continental U.S., and the Key West Cemetery, where one gravestone marks a self-professed fan of Julio Iglelsias. It was hot the day we went, creeping up to 93 degrees with no breeze. We were slick with sweat, and we would duck into to shops or museums whenever we could. We had to fight lethargy—the urge to find one spot and stay with a fan overhead and a cool drink in our clammy hands—but we only had the day, so we had to wring out our shirts and keep moving.

When we got to the Southernmost point of the continental U.S., which is marked by a massive, striped, concrete buoy on land, Denny walked to the far side of marker and looked out across the sea towards Cuba. The kids were asking him questions, because he was the trivia guy,
he always knew the weird and obscure details that delighted the kids, and he didn’t answer. He just smiled towards Cuba with his back to us. He was standing at the Southernmost point, and the kids and I were embarking to the lowest point of our lives, but we didn’t know it yet. All that we knew at that point was that Denny was on a different trip than we were, and not even a swarm of jellyfish would turn his course.

Four months after Key West, four days after Thanksgiving, Denny told me there was someone else—the affair had started over the summer, before Islamorada—and that he was leaving us. Two children, two dogs, a shared home, a shared life, and he said there was no more “us.” I had known “us” for so long, I couldn’t see the future he was handing me. I could only see “us” as the sea and the sky in that perfect moment before the dark settled, when your eyes play tricks and the air becomes water and the water becomes air. The “us” I knew had no separation. Until then.

When he left, he chose a life of no-parenting and constant leisure. He took the money and the time. He had taken the air and had left me the water. I fought against rough seas pulling me under with the weight of everything else a family needs. Luckily, my kids and I were good swimmers. But still, how the jellyfish stung even when we had our heads above the water.

The year before his exit was a year of depression, mid-life crisis, and disconnect all caught up in the misery of losing a well-loved parent. I tried to create happiness and warmth with a family vacation because it was what I knew to do to break up the beast that is regular living. But instead Denny used that vacation as a farewell to his family. It was a success for him because he felt he had given us a parting gift, and he was pleased with himself for ending our marriage and our family on what he thought was a good note.

I’ve had bad vacations before. I’ve thrown up for hours in a van, I’ve spent fevered nights on a hotel’s bathroom floor, I’ve missed flights and turns and my kids, and I’ve been rained on and
sunburned and frozen to the core. But I have still always returned happy that I went, with a good story to tell and a loopy smile on my face because I love a trip—any trip. Any trip except for our trip the Florida Keys. Even though it was months before Denny threw the hammer down on all of us, the signs were there even though I couldn’t see them for what they were. I see them now so clearly. All the avoidance, the surface talk, the “work” emails and phone calls. Despite the beauty, the trip was as fetid as the water off our beach. Denny thought he was giving us what we all wanted, something we could cling to in the dark winter to come. But instead, my son threw his box of shells on the driveway, shattering them across the ice that was settling in for a long season of snow. My daughter tried to flush her dolphin tail necklace down the toilet, and the sparkle caught my eye later. I rescued it, and keep it tucked away in case he ever makes amends with her.

Like the kids, I’ve thrown away the good memories too, though. I can see the trip with all of its pieces of hot, blue, fish, and night, but instead of the nostalgic filter that coats my other vacation memories with a warm, rich glow, this one is shaded with dark red—the color of both love and hate. It’s the only vacation I wish I hadn’t gone on. The only place I will never go back to. The Keys feel cursed, even though I think of them sometimes and wonder about the crocodiles we didn’t see, the sad dolphins swimming in circles, and those cormorants haunting the mangroves. I think of the place where the fetid swamp releases the muck, where the flies get pushed back by the light island breeze, and where the tea-stained water turns to smooth sea glass, and I think of what could have been. In the end, while I don’t want to return, I also can’t quite shake the place because a part of me is still there, lying in the cool sand under a velvet sky, waiting for my husband to push his arm against mine and take my hand as the stars rip through the night.
CHAPTER 5

THE BEST TRIP

We were spoiled, my sisters and I. The vacations we grew up with were vast in spirit and seemingly limitless in miles. We sat in rarified air, within feet of each other for days, with no door to slam, no telephone cord to stretch through the study door to avoid eavesdropping, and no other space to run to when the feelings got hot. We breathed each other in and then out. Our travels then were luxurious only in that we stayed away from home for so long—the gift of a two-week vacation. Almost absurd by today’s standards, when people feel overwhelmed to take long weekends and build up so much unused vacation time that the calendar seems warped when they think of it, like a map projection gone wrong.

When it comes to vacations, we are still spoiled, my sisters and I. We are now firmly in mid-life and yet we follow like ducklings when the call for summer vacation goes out. My parents are hitting late life now. But with good enough health and wealth, our vacations aren’t lost to the busy lives led so often while adulting. The tradition is more genetic now than a mere custom or habit. When the days grow so long you can almost forget there is an end to the sunshine, we all start to get antsy. Our synapses start firing in a new way, and we start packing, feeling the call of migration upon us.

We four girls, who grew up on a sprawling farm in Central Kentucky, all have small houses and drive older cars and budget the best we can. But for one week over the summer, my parents treat us to what they call our inheritance: a family vacation, lodging expenses paid. The grandchildren still must manage tip-to-toe sleeping arrangements sometimes and only my oldest sister, Sara, adds a day or two of camping beforehand in homage to the good old days. But now
my parents rent fancy homes off of VBRO to house all 18 of us comfortably together, with spouses and children, the later of whom span from newly adult to prekindergarten age. My parents don’t want us in hotels, which are so separate and compartmentalized. They want us underfoot and connecting. They want us under one roof while they still can provide it. And so we come—every summer.

The timing is always a given, as my parents’ wedding anniversary is July 16. On the day they got married, my great-grandfather took a photo of them with a box camera. They were standing on the lawn in front of Duncan Memorial Chapel in Crestwood, Kentucky. My mom was wearing a wedding dress she made because there wasn’t money to buy one, but it was so beautiful that Maggie, the third sister and the only short one like my mother—wore it at her wedding 44 years later. My parent’s wedding photo—the only one they took that day—was so good they put it in a photo album, with the sticky pages and the clear plastic film connected by a gold edge. The next year, they went to the Sears photography studio and got another photograph on their anniversary, and a tradition was born of taking a family photo on July 16th and then putting it—with an index card underneath with my dad’s slanted, perfect script noting the location and year—into the album following the wedding photo on the first page. All of my 50 years, I have been in a photo with my family on July 16th. When I was young, we didn’t always go on summer vacation over the week of July 16th, but as Sara and I entered college, it became more and more likely that the anniversary and the trip would be aligned. So early anniversary photos included such location standouts as the Lansdowne Pool in Lexington during my swim meet (my hair is legendary in that photo thanks to the short do, the new perm, and the chlorine—I was a veritable Little Orphan Annie with her finger in the socket), Sara’s band camp (she still hates that we came because it made her look uncool to leave for a family thing—and, again, she was at band camp), and a few just on the farm—with the blue Ford tractor, or our old horses Magic and Red, the white and orange striped Chevy farm truck, and one under the basketball goal and in front of the
Cherry Bomb. But since the 1990s, the locations for the anniversary photos have improved quite a bit, as they now feature vistas from places such as Lake Louise in Banff and Kula Botanical Gardens in Maui. Somehow over those many years, my parents went from humble to fancy and took us along for the ride.

Like all spoiled people, we take for granted the excess, and we find ourselves fussing about the location, as if that is the thing that matters. At some point over the five days surrounding Christmas, my parents and sisters and I sit around the massive lazy Susan table in the kitchen of my family home, and we try to decide where the family summer vacation will be in July. The years change, but peoples’ preferences do not. Maggie wants a beach trip, Amanda doesn’t want to drive far, Sara wants to camp again, Mom wants the West and mountains, Dad wants what Mom wants, and I try to play the game knowing that only one person’s opinion matters: Mom’s. But no one can say that. Mom believes this is a democratic process, even though it has never been nor will ever be. My parents are still the leaders of this clan, despite the wrinkles starting to take up residence on their daughters’ faces. My parents own these vacations in ways that can’t be fully calculated anymore. These trips that sometimes felt like punishments when we were young are now rewards. With two daughters on opposite coasts, one still in Kentucky and one up North, finding time to be together is a gift unlike any other. We are lucky enough to see each other every Christmas, as the family farm is better than any of our own homes for celebrating the holidays and with everyone around it feels right—festive family time for all. But Christmas brings its own stresses—its materialistic and hedonistic nature gets in the way of any semblance of relaxation.

That is why the summer vacation still reigns supreme, and it’s why we all find ourselves discussing the pros and cons of places still on the vacation list. Maggie with young kids and sunshine on her mind is pushing Atlantis. Amanda, who owns parachute pants with built-in sunblock won’t let it stay on the table for fear of instant melanoma, but she needn’t have
bothered, as Dad dismisses it entirely, blaming his sun-allergic feet. Amanda wants no more than a five-hour-drive—for her, leaving the rest of us with flights or overnights on the road. Maggie nixes Amanda’s ideas out of retribution for Atlantis. Sara is thinking of yurts in Idaho. Mom ignores the yurt idea but perks up at Idaho. Dad’s cousin went to Idaho with his family this past summer and said it was amazing, she tells us. Amanda says it’s too far away, and Maggie says it’s too cold there in the summer. Dad and I wait, watching Mom. Sara brings up Oregon—or maybe Arizona, and we are back to being all over the map again. We’ve done this routine for years now, this farce of a discussion and this attempt at early planning, but it always ends up with no final decision, and we disperse, first from the table and eventually from the farm, awaiting the decision to be handed down like a royal decree. Three months later, it’s confirmed: Coeur D’Alene, Idaho. Not in yurts. Get your plane tickets now.

I wonder what the discussion is like when we leave. If Mom and Dad feel any pressure to heed the call of beaches, proximity, or wilding. I doubt it. I think they dismiss our pleadings not out any spite or intent to displease the sisterhood, but instead with a faint ticking sound inside their heads and hearts that won’t be quieted and an acknowledgement of their own wrinkles, now rumpling what was once smooth and assured. How many summers are left? How many that they can drive cross country or fly, even? How many more can they afford—not only in money—but in stress and effort? How many more times can they see the Rockies out west, feel cool mountain breezes, and see the big blue skies that are waiting for every westward exploration?

Two summers ago, we went to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and took a white-water rafting day trip. My mom was brave in agreeing to go, and she sat in the back with her lifejacket practically bolted on. She fiercely gripped her paddle as she listened intently to the guide when he went over the safety protocol. He told us that if we got bounced out of the boat, we should just push our feet forward in the water, leaning back to protect our heads, and direct ourselves as quickly as we could back to the boat. I was sitting in the back, right across from my mom, and I
was watching as her eyes squinted and her body tightened up when the guide started talking about how many people had been popping out of the boat lately. There was one place on the river they called “the Car Wash,” which was especially precarious. They had a camera placed there to capture the moment of disembarking.

Mom was beside herself. This wasn’t an easy paddle down the river, and this wasn’t in a canoe with Dad. She was so far out of her element, and I knew she wanted out. But we had already pulled away, and there was nothing left to do but paddle whenever the guide said to. She stopped doing even that after our first brush with whitewater. The boat heaved and hawed, and afterward she slid her paddle down along the rubbery crevice at her feet and held onto the rope with both hands. We were all in for a crazy ride, and we were exhausted from paddling and thoroughly soaked by the time our guide said to straighten up: the Car Wash was next. He did not oversell it. It was worthy of Charibdys, and as we crested the first drop it was all we could do not to back paddle out of sheer self-preservation. We went down, then sharply up, and crashing down to the side. The boat folded in on itself, and we all gave up every pretense of paddling and just held on with white knuckles around wet rope. We made it out alive, with no one missing from the boat, and with Mom swearing in colorful language with a thick Eastern Kentucky accent that this would be the last time she ever got on water—any water—again.

When we got back to the outfitters, they showed us our photo from the Car Wash. It is total bedlam. My two younger sisters are kneeling in the bottom of the boat, and my older sister has flown forward and is laying fully across the large inflated rubber bench to the left. My son and daughter are tangled along the bow, where my two younger sisters should have been. My mom is staying seated by sheer stubborn will, with her arms straight as arrows by her sides and with her eyes closed so tightly, she may as well be in another dimension. My father, however, is framed in time and space in a position that defies logic, and it takes a minute of staring at the photo in order to fully understand that he should have fallen out of the boat. He has one foot—
just the toes, really—braced against a rope at the bottom of the boat that is holding him in, and the rest of his body, including the unbraced leg, is hiking out like a master sailor in entirely the wrong vessel. He is half in and half out of the spray, and how he was able to wrest himself back into the boat after the drop is a question best left to the Marvel Universe’s laws of physics. His face is determined, though, and without fear. I am right behind him, leaning back a little with one arm outstretched as if I could catch him—as if I could control the inevitable fall. But he saved himself instead.

It was three months after that trip that my father went to the cardiologist because his chest felt a little tight when he was jogging. The diagnosis was five blocked blood vessels in his heart. Two weeks later, he went in for quadruple bypass surgery. I couldn’t make it to the hospital for the surgery due to single parenting problems, which never have an easy fix. But when I saw him at Christmas, Dad was already talking about the upcoming summer vacation and where it should be. He knew of the perfect place—a beach next to mountains off the Washington coast, no camping but Sara could bring her van. That summer, we went on that exact vacation and Dad kept up just fine. But over the course of the week, anytime we were out together, the order was tweaked a little bit. He used to always stay in front when we went hiking or even through walks in town. But this trip, he stayed at the back, and each daughter in time fell back to walk with him, like geese in a backwards V, and chat as we strolled along, so happy to still be walking together in any formation at all.

On the map in the hallway of my childhood home, which hangs in the unassuming hallway at the center of the house and faces the always open doorway to the laundry room, my parents’ life on the road stretches out in Sharpied lines on faded paper. Every state is crisscrossed in red, like the palmate veins across elderly hands—except for two states. Idaho and Alaska stand unmarked—crisp and clean, just as they were when first printed in the early 1970s. Alaska is best seen through cruises, my parents have been told, and they don’t like the idea of a cruise, so
Alaska remains their last frontier. Idaho has been just missed time and time again. The red line comes close to the Idaho border, with trips to the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone, but its straight edge has never been crossed. All the red lines in Washington State are on the far west coast, and with my oldest sister living in Seattle, there are many of those Washington red lines, stretching up into Canada, south to Oregon, west to the coast, and onto the islands of Puget Sound, but never east towards the plains of central Washington and the mountains of Idaho.

This summer a new line will be drawn on the Jackson map. My dad will do the honors, while my mother will stand beside him and remind him of the day trips and the routes in and out of Coeur D’Alene. I don’t know if they will stand back this year and look at the map with fresh eyes, searching for a place that needs their attention and their summertime. Or if they will look at the map with tired eyes and regret Seward’s Folly. Or maybe they will just draw the line and walk away, preferring not to think so far ahead, instead just knowing that the next trip is preordained and will come to them in time.

My sisters and I won’t there for this part of the ritual. We will be back in our small homes, with our own children, posting photos to Facebook of another great summer vacation. We will feel connected in a way that we won’t again until the next summer, as the year will put its heavy foot upon us again with its daily travails, and we will get wrapped up in vacuuming, meal making, driving kids around, and, of course, our jobs. But we will read books and see movies and share the best ones on the family group chat. Maggie will send artsy videos of her children that make us all laugh and click the HAHA response button. Amanda will share photos from Kentucky of her kids visiting the farm, making the other three feel homesick and envious. Sara will keep us updated on the college search process for her oldest, and we will all root for her to attend school somewhere close to one of us. And I will bemoan the single parenting life and my kid’s medical struggles, and they will text back with hearts, and I will know they mean it. My
mom will never reply but she will read every text and then tell my dad, who doesn’t have a phone. And we will miss each other, and we will wait for the next time.

When the days grow long and hot, and the sun stays high so that we eat late dinners in full light, when every flower has fully bloomed and has dried edges crimped by the heat, when insects fly in and out of the broken screen door like they pay the mortgage, when the office is stifling and the view is blocked by ivy, and when the dogs pant indoors, then it is time. When the mind can think of nothing else but the freedom of the road, the sun through the windshield, the mile markers flying by, and the hours streaming into days, we will know it’s time. Our eyes will be ready to see the faces we know the best, to work to make them laugh and to fill up on their particular light. From Kentucky to DC to New York to Seattle, the calendar will call out what we have already heard and felt, and we will stuff our cheeks with Juicy Fruit gum, turn up the volume for Prince, put the pedal down with one foot, and prop the other up as high as it will go. Then the road will take us to that final red dot on the map, where our parents will be waiting in the sun under that brilliant blue sky—ready to spoil us again.
CURRICULUM VITA

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Profile:
Experienced program manager, community organizer, and editor, with expertise in:

- K-12 education-focused community organization efforts
- Community service support through higher education
- Technical editing

Education:
Master of Arts in English
- University of Louisville, Louisville, KY
- May 2020

Bachelor of Arts, Environmental Conservation
- University of Colorado, Boulder, CO
- May 1991

Professional Experience:
Assistant Director of the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, Hobart and William Smith Colleges (Geneva, NY) / April 2019-present

- Builds HWS and Geneva community connections and relationships.
- Directs college-student led tutoring program for elementary students, including Boys and Girls Club Tutor Corps and America Reads at North Street School.
- Organizes American Red Cross Blood Drives on the HWS campus and four Days of Service yearly.
- Manages HWS Votes effort to increase college student voter registration.
• Supervises HWS Community Sale (selling unwanted year-end items from the dorms), raising over $11,000 and saving over 14,000 pounds from the landfill in 2019.
• Oversees over 700 student leaders, tutors and volunteers over the school year, some of whom are eligible for federal work study wages.

Geneva 2020 Program Manager, Hobart and William Smith Colleges (Geneva, NY) / February 2015-October 2019

• Cultivated local support for Geneva 2020 through strategic workgroups and committees made up of community leaders.
• Fulfilled grant requirements by careful budgeting and successfully reaching grant benchmarks.
• Facilitated monthly Action Team meetings and quarterly Steering Committee meetings.
• Collaborated with New York Cradle to Career Alliance partners to follow national StriveTogether protocol, building sustainability and continuous improvement into Geneva 2020.
• Worked with data experts to build compelling baseline data for Geneva 2020 outcomes.
• Wrote and edited the annual Community Baseline Report for Geneva 2020, as well as distributing 400 copies to local partners and residents.
• Facilitated the creation of Geneva 2020’s vision and mission statement, goals and outcomes, and governance structure.

Academic Services Tutor, Keuka College (Keuka Park, NY) / August 2008-March 2010

• Worked closely with college students to hone basic to advanced writing skills on research papers, homework assignments and resumes.

Contract Editor, IT Business Edge (remotely from NY) / November 2003-July 2006

• Created successful, weekly “Outsourcing for Strategic Advantage” e-newsletter that covered outsourcing as it pertained to information technology industries.
• Wrote weekly interviews with industry experts in the IT outsourcing field.

Review Editor, TechRepublic (Louisville, KY and remotely from TX and NY) / July 1999-October 2003

• Mobilized a network of freelance technology writers at TechRepublic, updating the writers on publishing opportunities, deadlines and any editorial concerns.
• Edited and wrote technology articles on a variety of subjects, including database management systems, CIO strategies and other IT management skills.
Editorial Coordinator, Managing Editor, interim Editor-in-Chief, Louisville Magazine (Louisville, KY) / January 1996-June 1999

- Produced monthly city magazine and all associated advertising supplements.
- Recruited and coached freelance writers and monthly contributors.
  - Organized special events associated with Louisville Magazine (i.e., Best of Louisville Awards and Best of Louisville Bash).
- Aligned editorial and graphics departments during redesign.
- Assigned and edited departmental and feature stories for Louisville Magazine.
- Wrote features, essays, and reviews for Louisville Magazine.

Community Service

Geneva City School District Board of Education Member, 2011-2019 (Geneva, NY)

- Vice President, 2014-19
  - Oversaw the management of the superintendent of the Geneva School District and all district policies, as well as the oversight of a budget of over $52,000,000.


- Created, coordinated, publicized and hosted North Street Science Night for all 2nd-5th grade Geneva students.