

I Visited the Grand Canyon

By Elaine McCluskey

There is no point in describing a man who traverses Nova Scotia on a ten-speed bike with a concertina strapped to his back, is there? Let's just say that Randy was resourceful, which is why he answered my ad in the first place.

"Hello," said a rural voice steeped in green work shirts and sea urchins. "Do you have an accordion for sale?"

"Yes, I do," I replied. "It's actually an English concertina with ebony ends."

"Does it have all the buttons?"

"Hmmm yes."

"Would you be willing to trade for a set a walrus tusks?"

"Yes," I said for no sound reason. "I guess so."

Randy arrived the next night from Mushaboom, winded, with the tusks. Short and wiry, Randy was wearing an army backpack and glasses which, through an optometric misadventure, made one eye appear larger than the other.

I never would have met Randy if I had listened to my mother, who had warned me against placing the ad. "You will get *all kinds* of people," she cautioned, raising the specter of axe murderers and religious fanatics. Randy, who was neither, was about to make the return trip when I paused. I admired his independence and his membership in an underclass of Maritimers who never bought anything new. People who purchased beds from Sally Ann, T-shirts emblazoned with empty boasts like I VISITED THE GRAND CANYON. Cutlery from a shop that displayed, not only a Mexican sombrero, but a full-length prosthetic leg.

I insisted that he come inside before the fifty-mile trip home.

"I hit a porcupine on the way in here," Randy confessed over cranberry juice, "but them buggers is a dime a dozen."

"Right," I nodded.

"You ever eat porcupine pie?"

Randy and I spent two hours discussing road kill, an area he knew well as he used to drive a shuttle bus that stopped each Friday at the veterans' hospital and the parole office. Porcupine can be stringy apparently, but nice when stuffed with sauerkraut or chopped apple. Squirrel should be

marinated, preferably in moonshine. By the time we were finished, it was so dark that I had no choice but to offer him my couch to sleep on.

Given my situation, I probably spent too much time with Randy. By selling the concertina, I was trying to remove the clutter from my life. I am in the process of cataloguing the men I've dated, wondering if, as someone wise once said, "Fate is often met taking the road you chose to avoid it."

Miguel was my boyfriend in university. His parents lived in Mexico where his father was an architect who restored pillaged haciendas, his mother an artist who worked in gold. Bohemians, they lived in a monastic house of adobe and timber beams.

We met in a political science class where we debated Chile, the CIA, and the Allende overthrow by Pinochet with a fervor that now seems odd. Miguel had brown eyes which were always squinted as though the sun was scorching instead of weak and diluted by fog.

He was engrossed in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the epic novel of magic realism by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. His apartment was decorated with an omnipotent sun and woven rugs of geometric designs. I was away from my parents for the first time. When I grew homesick, Miguel gave me earrings made from vintage *milagros* (Spanish for miracles) like those left at altars or placed on statues of Jesus. They come in many shapes -- birds, horses, arms, legs -- but mine were houses, and they were *real* gold, unlike the tin offerings sold to tourists.

Miguel showed me a photo of his parents outside the chapel of a once-grand *hacienda*, which had stables and a school ravaged by peasant armies. Tall and fair, his parents looked like bleached cornstalks on the burnt Latin landscape.

"Are you adopted?" I asked Miguel, bronze as a glazed pot.

"Oh no," he scoffed in horror. "I acclimatized to living in the sun."

One night, while naked and drunk on tequila, he told me something about nuns and an orphanage and a secret arrangement with his parents, all as fantastic as a Marquez angel falling to earth in a rainstorm. He mentioned *charros* and foreign bloodlines. I often wondered if that involuntary admission, induced by the heart of the blue agave plant and never repeated, doomed us.

"Should I meet you at the airport?" I asked after summer break.

"No," Miguel said flatly. "I won't be coming back."

In the following months, as I ate and studied, I felt numb as though I had witnessed a tragedy but could not associate the mangled flesh with the human life it once was. Instead of following a path illuminated by ghosts, Miguel became a stock broker in Mexico City.

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I live in a sixty-unit building with six floors and a tenant base of seniors and gay schoolteachers in their forties. Crummy place, but I like the location, near the harbour and train tracks. I find them as comforting as a white noise machine. The main problem is the walls, so thin that I can hear constant coughing and the whirrrrrrrrr of an electric toothbrush.

The teachers, who leave for long spells in summer, are agreeable and keep to themselves. The seniors are nosy and cranky. Whenever I venture out, face masked, I can feel their eyes on me as unyielding as Gulag guards.

“Mindless meddlers,” I mutter when I catch two watching Randy, who walks straight-backed as though he’s been fitted with a metal rod and halo.

The only conversations I can clearly make out come from 208, occupied by Iris and Don Black. After years of having the floor, Don, a retired TV correspondent, has been reduced to recalcitrant audience of one. Whenever Iris attempts to break into his monologues, she is stopped with the abominable, “When you see my lips moving, that means I am talking.”

Many times, I have heard how Don, dressed in Innu wear, risked his life driving a snowmobile over the Labrador Sea in pursuit of a story. He waited, as he tells victims in the laundry room, five years for news to break in northern Newfoundland. One day, the caps fell off his two front teeth, rendering him a walking lithhph. Neither the medical clinic nor the hardware store, tired, I am sure, of his odious “When you see my lips moving. . .” would provide adhesives. Then a plane crashed on the ice, and a native freelancer went live to air for two days straight, winning awards that should have been Don’s.

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Jonah was a fisheries observer who went to sea on foreign vessels to patrol Canada’s two-hundred-mile limit. On one trip, a drunken Russian held Jonah hostage with a Kalashnikov AK-47, on another a fierce storm hurled him from his bunk.

Sensitive about occupational hazards like scabies and lice, Jonah developed a series of social tics to elevate himself to a higher social order. As soon as we entered a house, *any* house, Jonah would point to the art and announce, “That picture is hung too high.” Any time we were served vegetables, he would proclaim, before the humble rutabaga even touched his lips, “These are overcooked.” And if the wine was German or sweet, he would cringe.

One summer, Jonah went away and left his dog with me. He needed to recharge, he explained, after a season filled with boats of silver hake and prostitutes and Cuban cigars.

While I was walking Barney, the big Lab attacked a teacup poodle named Petunia, leaving blood, fur and a small mangled sweater. I was so upset that I drove two days, unannounced, to see Jonah who answered the door wearing a black kimono with fiery dragons on it. Oddly enough, Jonah, that stickler for etiquette, had wrapped the robe incorrectly, overlapping the left side with the right, which in Japan is done only with corpses.

“Oh, come in,” he said nonchalantly. Then lifting one flowing kimono sleeve, he gestured to a woman with a jug of Lonesome Charlie. “This is Svetlana.”

About ten years ago, I caught a random glance of Jonah. It was Boxing Day and he was standing in Canadian Tire with a wooden toilet seat under one arm in the endless returns line. The counter was near an open door and the draft seemed unnecessarily cruel to shoppers who had already received unsuitable gifts. Jonah had a weary, disappointed look on his face.

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I hear a play-by-number organ coming from 208, then recriminations.

While Don was pursuing his career, Iris, a former beauty queen, followed, taking lowly positions in rotating cities. She had been an on-air performer before she was uprooted, and remains, to this day, bitter about her last makeshift job with a federal government department.

In that job, Iris concocted studies that fell into two categories: “the happier at home” and “the not happier at home.” Under the former, were issues involving hospitals, institutions and palliative care facilities. “A study shows that mothers of quadruplets, released from hospital four hours after giving birth, are happier at home!” Alzheimer’s patients, terminally ill seniors and transplant recipients were all happier at home, according to Iris’s never-questioned studies.

The only people *not* happier at home were toddlers. Under a plan to force women onto tax rolls, Iris manufactured young misfits who stared longingly out windows at the day care children who trudged by in rain or snow, tied together like sled dogs.

Iris is most resentful of this job, which seems to represent the cost of being young and following impulses as random as lightning. She mentions the studies whenever Don waxes about Press Gallery dinners or colleagues who addressed each other as “Senator”.

Meanwhile, the superintendent sneaking into Ms. Whynacht’s apartment after she leaves for school with her acoustic guitar and Jim Croce songbook

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After Miguel, I entered a series of brief relationships, the kind you stumble into to erase traces of the last. Obliterators.

Victor had been a chubby child. To lose weight, he had limited his food consumption to one improbable item: French fries. To adhere to this diet, he frequented Chuckie's Chip Wagon and filled his freezer with frozen fries. One night, we went to an Italian restaurant with another couple.

"Do you have fries?" Victor asked breezily, as if inquiring about the calamari.

"Uh no." The waitress, dressed in black, as lovely as the decor, was a dark-haired vision who kept the orders in her head next to arias. She smiled sublimely.

"Then, I will just have a gin and tonic."

To his credit, Victor was able to maintain his composure while the table became strained and awkward as though there had been an argument over the bill.

Once, at my insistence, Victor tried to eat a banana but immediately regurgitated the foreign fruit in an episode so embarrassing for both of us that it spelled the end.

It's curious how time has stripped these events of emotion: pain, turmoil, melodrama. Now, they are all like old songs in my head, the words clear, but too familiar to evoke passion.

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Steven and his roommate, Mac, staged train parties and New Year's bashes with Abba songs. I'd never seen a Murphy bed before -- their popularity peaked in the 1930s -- but they let me sleep on theirs. Steven, I discovered while tracing past paramours, now runs an elegant Bed and Breakfast in the Annapolis Valley. It has wrought-iron beds, lush florals and towels the color of whipped butter. He and Mac are married.

On the train tracks, I see a girl in a black dress and matching hat with cat ears. I watch the Goth cat follow the tracks and I wonder if she plays the flute. I hope she does not live in the shrouded world of blogs, communing with outcasts with names like *dark_heart*, narcissists who wallow in misery and threaten to dismember their parents or the night boss at Subway.

At some point, we are all like stray cats who drift from house to house, adapting to the food, smells and rhythms, waiting for the owner who will define you with a name: Patches, Smokey, Bohemian, Career Woman, which you willingly accept in return for love, however depthless.

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I see a taxi stop outside my building and deposit an ancient woman, so faded that I can hear cells dying. She plants each foot carefully to avoid a fall and then to my surprise, boots a discarded coffee cup.

I've been to buildings that house a more sociable breed of seniors, the ones who play bridge and square dance, who feed squirrels and ducks, but this is not that place. This is the home of the disappointed and the deserted, a place to store regrets and harbor grudges.

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I met Warren when I was twenty-five and living in a village with antique stores and a blacksmith's shop. I was teaching Grade Four; he was working as a diver for an oil company.

I had never lived in the country before, that enigmatic chunk of Canadiana, and I was overwhelmed by the stark beauty and crushing solitude. My school, a flat brick building, had seventy students, but none of the charm of the original two-room schoolhouse.

It was November and the village was in that strange lull before the streets were dressed for Christmas but after the summer accents -- the sailboats, antique hunters, and long-haired teens -- had gone. A black cat climbed in and out of a shop window, bored. A house in the process of moving sat up on blocks. Stripped of summer bustle, the village had reverted to a sturdy town of fishing and commerce.

Warren approached me at a coffee shop owned by Marg who drove a repainted van. Marg had done a booming business all summer, but on this day, three old ladies in thick sweaters were the only other customers.

Rugged, with crinkly blue eyes, Warren appeared before me.

"Would you like to taste my carrot cake?" he asked with a voice that suggested more.

"Okay," I replied for no sound reason.

Warren was older than most men I had dated, a free spirit who had embraced the counterculture of the sixties, but had practical skills like fixing trucks and building furniture. He had a spooky, peaced-out aura at odds with some of his pursuits. While most hippies were floating plumes of beads and hair, Warren took substantial steps and only seemed wispy around the edges. He told me that I reminded him of his girlfriend in high school, a Swedish doctor's daughter, who had moved to New York. "We're still good friends, though," he said, with that peaced-out look.

Warren had tried LSD in high school, he told me, with a married couple who ran a pottery shop. Before opening the shop, they had taught art in prison. When I met them, it was clear by their smirks that Warren was considered a ladies' man. There had been one relationship, longer and more complex than the rest, which everyone alluded to. The others seemed fleeting.

Warren had a way of looking at you so directly that you gulped. “If we are going to be friends,” he said one night, undressing me in the potters’ bathroom. “You are going to have to trust me.”

He wore rough Icelandic sweaters and a silver elephant-hair bracelet. According to African legend, the bracelet assures the owner good health and fortune, the two movable knots represent the earth and nature, the four strands the seasons. “My parents don’t know what to make of me,” he laughed. “My father is a judge.”

Warren rented an iron-red house, a storey-and-a-half just outside the village owned by a lobster fisherman named Stanley. The wooden house sat on three acres of woodland, framed by a mat of shrubs and wildflowers. Warren filled the house with uncomfortable handmade furniture and the smell of elaborate meals. I loved the symmetry of the house: two front windows and a central door painted black. Above the door was a dormer with a window that overlooked granite boulders and occasional deer. Both sides of the house had four windows.

It was one of those houses that idealistic couples restored, adding goats and sheep and children named Martha and Jake. I wondered what type of children Warren would raise: sensitive souls or demons who ate peanuts and left the shells on your porch.

One night while Warren was outside collecting firewood, I opened his dresser. On top of his T-shirts, I saw a stack of photos of Warren and an old girlfriend, who, from her posture and their matching Icelandic sweaters, appeared to be substantial, entrenched, and to my surprise, the potter.

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At the time I shared an apartment with Gail, another teacher, a pale ectomorph with legs like straws, the same circumference from the ankles to the thighs. Her feet stuck out like scuba-diving flippers. Gail walked awkwardly as though she had just climbed out of a lake, feet apart, stiff-kneed.

She had recently met a Mountie who picked her up on a Harley, which he drove at high speed without a helmet. In his house, Gail reported, aghast, he had pit bulls and loaded guns.

One night, the Mountie told Gail that they had Warren under surveillance. “For what?” I asked, shocked, but Gail didn’t know and I had no reason to believe the brute after Gail had come home sobbing.

Neither Gail nor I were men-pleasers, those puzzling mixes of acquiescence and allure, those strange creatures who, for no apparent reason, draw the opposite sex, as inexplicably as people who can grow giant pumpkins. We were *not* those women.

I continued to see Warren at his perfect house until he shot me. Not on purpose. He was aiming for the Mountie, who, in a blur, stormed through the black door and pinned Warren to the ground. The bullet pierced my chest and shattered my spine. I have been in a wheelchair ever since.

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On Tuesday, I placed an ad in *Bargain Buyer*.

FOR SALE: Walrus tusks. An eclectic accessory for any home. Call Emerald.

So far, I have received two calls. One from Bedford, the other from a pleasant sounding lady named Pearl from Shubenacadie. I have given her directions to my apartment and told her where to park to avoid surveillance.

