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## Family Album

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Family Album

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

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B.A., Grinnell College, 1981

May, 2009

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## Abstract

A collection of eight nonfiction stories by Missy Bowen about the Minnesota State Fair, owls, winter, summer, stairs, lumber, and the rock and roll life.

**KEY WORDS:** music, Camile Baudoin, Minnesota, The Radiators, barred owl, St. Croix River, roadies, The Subdudes, music, musicians, Minnesota State Fair.

## Preface

An album is, in Latin, a blank white writing tablet. In the English language the word has come to mean a book that houses a collection of items such as photographs or stamps. In American Baby Boomer, it means a twelve-inch disc of grooved black vinyl and the songs recorded thereupon.

Here is an album of stories. Hold it by the edges as you slide it out of the jacket and place it on the turntable.

Side One is sequenced roughly by date, beginning with “Fair Play,” which is an introduction and tribute to the stalwart Minnesotan culture in which I was raised. The events described in “Bird of Prey” took place in the early 1970s, when I was in junior high, but in a larger sense the story is about my mother’s respect and love for wild creatures, and how she passed that on to me. I am extraordinarily lucky to still have her on the other end of the phone line, to gain from her insights as I wrote this story, and to be able to compare with and benefit from her memories and perspective.

Children become parents, of course, and life may not be so kind to either party, as I learned from Andy Zanca, the subject of “From A to Z.” It may take a village—in this case, Carbondale, Colorado—to raise a child, but the villagers, too, may have to do some growing up along the way. Side One concludes with “Tread Lightly,” a story about aging fathers and adult daughters finding common ground through good lumber and bad puns.

Side Two enjoys a more thematic cohesiveness, a mini-version of the concept album if I can carry the metaphor further than I probably should. I have tried for many years to write a

book on the world of touring musicians, to explain the rock and roll life, and until now haven't been able to fit the information into what I feel is the right format. I grew up in a musical household and have spent most of my adult life working in radio or music education, and I'm married to the lead guitarist in the iconic New Orleans band The Radiators. It was of great importance to me that my on-going explanatory efforts be represented here, and that the subject receives adequate exploration from my insider's point of view. Thus, we begin with a relatively in-depth look at rock and roll's bolts and nuts, that is, a band's sound gear and the roadies who move it around, the "Kings of the Road." "Soul Kitchen" explores the unique scheduling challenges faced by touring musicians, particularly when it comes to getting their food on. The third and fourth essays, "Head Laundry" and "Ring of Fire," address deeper, more personal issues surrounding our relationships with music and my own relationships with musicians, especially my husband.

The selection process was similar to making any other album, the same wading through piles of snippets and fragments, the choosing of semi-finalists, and the molding into orderly pages. I chose the essays included here based on the integrity and universality of each individual story rather than for their contribution to a larger whole; it was serendipity that these eight works fell so neatly into the balanced four/four structure. The initial title of "Head Laundry" was "Drift Away," which, if I had used it, would have given Side Two a certain jukebox feel, with each piece named after a song. It's important though, that each work stands on its own, confident as a hit single.

It's also interesting to note what isn't here. Despite the glorious wealth of subject matter offered by my adopted city, there aren't any essays set in New Orleans, nor is there mention of

the more subtle, yet material-rich Iowa, where I spent six very formative years gathering a lifetime's worth of stories.

What the reader also won't find here are stories about dogs, which is significant because I am a dog person. (When my father reads this he will assuredly remark, "Remember when you were five and cried so hard every time you saw *Lassie* that we couldn't let you watch it anymore?") As do many people, I consider my dogs my children. I've written a lot about them. But I was faced with two challenges. The first is a curmudgeonly belief that, while I love writing about dogs—*my* dogs—I don't like reading about other people's dogs because I already know the story and the ending is never happy. Hence the second challenge: my Katrina pack, Maggie, Jazz, and Bandit, were with me before and through the storm and our nomadic four-month exile afterwards. They have all died in the last three years—Bandit violently, Maggie and Jazz painfully of old age. To bring an essay to fruition requires traveling deep into one's feelings on the topic, and my grieving is still too raw to visit those innermost places and come away with meaningful reflection. In the sense that a thesis represents a culmination, mine should contain an essay involving dogs, but consider this reference sufficient for now.

After the final manuscript was assembled, I was fascinated to find an obvious, yet unintended prevailing theme of family. Each story explores this motif in some way, casting light on a few of the many flavors of family we may experience as humans. These range from the single parent-child relationship to the larger, extended and more loosely defined tribes we find among our friends and fellow citizens. Whether our sense of family is defined by natal bonds or through ties of friendship or association, it is the glue that holds us together. I don't know what else to make of the appearance of this common thread other than to note that I have been blessed



with patient and wonderful families throughout my life, and everything I am and can be exists because a fellow tribal member tried to raise me up.

Lastly, a note about nomenclature. I came of age in Minnesota, in the era of Woodward and Bernstein, was mentored by some name-brand journalists, and set out to become a reporter. I worked for Iowa newspapers starting in 1978, becoming a full-time writer and photographer in 1981. I was pretty good at it, especially the photography, but then *USAToday* came along, irrevocably shifting the balance of power between the news and advertising sides and introducing a national corporate mentality to the news process that I found untenable. I fled the Midwest to the heart of the Colorado Rockies, and for a decade was both on the air and running the business of a small public radio station. I now live in New Orleans, where I manage the music department at the University of New Orleans and program a radio show on WWOZ. Along the way I have written hard news and features for print and radio, weekly newspaper commentaries, record and concert reviews, press releases, liner notes, a lot of grants, and the occasional goofy poem. Through the Creative Writing Workshop at UNO, I have explored the craft of the essayist, and thanks to Katrina, have had close experience with the narrative form through the *Voices Rising* project.

So, having slung a few words in my time, I have come to dislike the term “nonfiction.” I don’t like my writing—or any writing in the genre—to be defined by what it’s not rather than by what it is. The fiction writers have it easier, because they can make stuff up to get out of a narrative jam. (They’ll argue differently.) Those of us who choose to write about real things, however, must rely on actual timelines and real people, keep imagined dialogue on a short leash, and remain sensitive to (but not subservient to) the perspectives of both the writer and subjects. Of course there are many truths to any story. Memory is especially tricky to work with, but we take

that on when we attempt a factual story, essay, or other nonfiction work. Truth as an ideal comprises the essence of the genre, the noble aim of the writer, and the currency with which our readers invest their trust.

Momentum being what it is, though, we're probably stuck with the "nonfiction" label, and I have to grudgingly admit that "Truth Writing" lacks a certain marketing flair. At the same time, the advent of such adjectival *arrivistes* as "creative nonfiction" or "literary nonfiction" is generating confusion as to where truth's boundaries lie, while readers, burned by falsehoods, are losing trust in the genre's integrity. Here's what I think: When writing nonfiction, I work very hard to stick to the truth as I perceive it. It is always challenging and rarely convenient, and readers are quick to share their contradictory experiences with me. It would be easy to invent for the sake of a stronger narrative, and it's fine if I do, but then the story is *not* nonfiction. (I wonder if E. B. White shares my annoyance with this particular double negative.) James Frey can take every one of his *Million Little Pieces* and move them across the aisle to the Fiction section.

Whether true or fictional, a good story and solid prose stand on their own, just as does a good picture or song. I keep coming around to definitions; humor me once more: while we understand "thesis" to describe a dissertation on original research or a creative work offered towards an advanced degree, the word also means the first stroke of the conductor's baton, the accented segment of a measure, the downbeat. Drop the needle on the platter, and play.

Side One

## Fair Play

To a Minnesotan, the State Fair is as integral a part of our collective psyches as the Vikings and ice fishing and sweet corn in early August and your parents reminding you how, when they were your age, they walked a mile to school in ten feet of snow uphill both ways.

The fair, marketed as “The Great Minnesota Get-Together,” takes place the last two weeks of August, ending on Labor Day. When I was a kid, school started the day after Labor Day, and thus the end of the fair meant the end of golden freedom as well as a reminder to not be fooled by the balmy temperatures and soft blue skies: the evils of a winter so cold that one’s lung tissue can actually freeze will soon be upon us.

When we were an agrarian state the State Fair was an important convention for rural growers and urban millers, but early on - before the Civil War - Minnesotans embraced the Fair as something much bigger than a tractor swap. It became a point of pride, and we worked at making it the best. Now, after one hundred and fifty years, our Midway is more garish, our 4-H kids more wholesome, our Giant Pig bigger, and our tacky stuff tackier than anywhere else. It’s any other state’s fair on steroids.

The Fairgrounds lie in the heart of the Twin Cities, sandwiched between Minneapolis and St. Paul just off busy I-94, tucked amid strip malls and modest homes. The 340-acre grounds include paved city streets, hundreds of buildings, a lake stocked with walleye and northern pike, and a working dairy farm. It’s so big it has a separate sewer system and its own ZIP code.

For most of the year it's a sleepy little neighborhood abutted by modest homes and established strip malls. As July wanes and the first Back-to-School ads appear, the Fairgrounds, like the monarch butterfly, sheds its chrysalis, a-flutter with bustle and anticipation.

With hammers singing and drills ringing, crews erect booths while exhibitor trucks wait in line to load in. As Opening Day looms, farm families arrive hauling long trailers full of sweaty cattle, horses, and swine. They'll live in those trailers, or camp at the campground. Television stations set up remote broadcast booths and vendors warm up the deep fat fryers.

As Opening Day dawns, police barricades go up, the neon-T-shirted Parking Patrol begins flagging cars into converted fields behind the grandstand (*Tonight! The Oak Ridge Boys! Fireworks Extravaganza!*) and it's time to get together and become one with 1.7 million other Minnesotans.

I like to go to the State Fair with my friend MJ the Fair Junkie. She knows the schedule by heart, is up on all the hot tips, and has the inside line on important information, such as where the secret grocery store is to get AA batteries and who will serve you beer after hours.

MJ and her posse work each other with a game they call "Know Your Fair." Challenge: "Where's the shortest line to the bathroom?" Correct response: "What day and what time?"

It's also great fun to take my New Orleans-bred husband and immerse him in the culture of my people. Minnesotans are a low-key group who insist they want no truck with flamboyance and noise, but at the same time, the culture of the North Star State is as rich and quirky as anything found in the Big Easy. Our environment shaped our collective character: for one thing, six or seven months of brutal, dark winters offers a culture the choice of justifiably killing each other or learning how to live civilly in small indoor spaces and take up ice fishing. Minnesotans chose the latter, developing an appetite for intellectual pursuits, a wide tolerance for the creative arts.

These circumstances beget idiosyncrasies that may not be as flashy or public as those on display in the French Quarter, but they are nonetheless idiosyncrasies that are uniquely and wonderfully Minnesotan, and there is nowhere better to experience this unique culture than at the State Fair.

At noon on Opening Day, with a few puffy cloud-sheep grazing in a perfect blue sky, my husband and I navigate the car through the neighborhoods towards this uniquely Minnesotan Mecca. We follow the orange flags into our parking space, clip on our fanny packs, and join the throng hiking up the Randall Avenue hill. We hang a right at Underwood stand atop the fair, or at least atop Machinery Hill.

Below, the tree-shaded street stretches for a mile or so, lined with food booths, souvenir stands, and appliance displays. Past the hulking Grandstand on the right rise the roofs of the livestock barns and beyond them rise the high rides of the Mighty Midway. On the left, past the Agri-Land farm implement displays and the Kidway, towers the landmark Space Needle. (Fair Rule Number One: If you get lost, go to the Space Needle. Mom will find you there.)

Overhead, the Skyglider carries laughing teens and footsore grownups to the campgrounds and other outposts in the hinterlands.

Machinery Hill is a little sad in these times of large corporate farms. Cub Cadet lawnmowers and leaf mulchers have replaced the acres of green John Deere balers and red International Harvester harrowing plows. As we stroll down the hill, propelling ourselves deeper into the heart of the Fair, we wax nostalgic for the agrarian life that defined our character yet is slipping away.

As I walk, lost in thoughts of our changing times, I become aware that my personal space is shrinking; the crowd is thickening with stroller-pushing moms and beer-bellied dads in too-

tight shorts and T-shirts. Suddenly, the breeze shifts, and I catch that first distinctive whiff of Fair Food, that cloud of fried grease and sugar that hangs heavy for blocks and can only be neutralized by animal barn aromas. My mawkish mood lifts with that first sniff, my reaction downright Pavlovian. My salivary glands activate. My step quickens. Louisiana cuisine may have made major contributions to my weight and my appreciation for well-prepared meals, but walking down Underwood amidst my people on a beautiful late summer day, there is nothing better than the anticipation of Fair Food.

Fair Food has its categories. You can have your run-of-the-mill carnival menu, your cheese curds and your nachos, but the Minnesota State Fair lays claim to what has to be the most robust, varied, and enthusiastic celebration of Food on a Stick anywhere. With sixty-three types of food officially served on a stick, this unique cuisine trend is touted in Fair commercials as “Fine dining, Minnesota style!”

Start with your basic Pronto Pup and other forms of the ubiquitous corn dog. Was it a long winter that motivated someone to stick a thin wooden skewer into a hot dog, dip it in cornbread batter, dunk the whole mess into boiling grease until the batter fried golden brown, and proffer it as a treat? The convenience of portable meals? Who are we as a people that we now celebrate it as a cultural culinary icon?

Over the years the stick thing has gotten out of hand. Every row of food booths on every street hawks foot long hot dogs and bratwursts and Polish sausage and venison sausage on a stick. There's roasted corn on a stick because a cob just can't get it done. Tempura on a stick. Walleye on a stick. Ostrich on a stick. Alligator that wandered too far from the bayou and ended up in Minnesota on a stick. Macaroni and cheese. Tater tot hot dish on a stick? Ya shure, you betcha. Deep fried fruit for the health-conscious and a Fudge Puppy for those who aren't.

I used to think it couldn't get any worse than the Deep Fried Candy Bars (Mars Bars, Snickers, Milky Ways, and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups) from the bright yellow and red stand plunk in the middle of the Fairgrounds' main crossroads, but a couple of years ago saw the much-talked-about debut of Deep Fried Twinkies on a Stick, and that may be the topper. As the Fair ad says, if you can't eat it on a stick, why bother eating it at all?

The stick schtick has grown into a principal fair icon. The *Star-Tribune* gives out funeral parlor-style fans printed with fairgrounds maps, marketing them as "Map on a Stick." Free samples of the latest Windows software are hawked as "Microsoft on a Stick," and you can stay current on fair doings by reading the "Blog on a Stick."

Food on a stick may be convenient for young moderns on the move. Us oldsters, however, sometimes appreciate the camaraderie found at a communal picnic table, enjoying dripping pork sandwiches with an elderly couple from Aitken who, as it turns out, remember when my great-grandfather was mayor there, a time when sticks were just one level up from tinder in the food chain of fire. We watch a small flock of girls giggle by, licking red and blue Bomb Pops. We agree that the stick food is beginning to taste like the very type of fad that Minnesotan culture is primed to eschew.

Therefore, I am especially thankful for Fair Food standards like Tom Thumb donuts. Tom Thumb donuts do not arrive on a stick. They are hand-delivered, greasy, crispy and hot, in small red and white wax-paper bags proffered by well-kempt high-school kids earning some college change. The first bite of one of these quarter-sized hunks of fried, sugared dough is the essence of State Fair, the moment when I shed my "New Orleans food is better than anywhere" attitude and accept the superiority of my native Minnesotan-ness. This is the food of my people, the taste of home.



When that unique whiff of cinnamon and grease hits my nose I turn into a dairy cow at milking time with the barn in sight. Feet on autopilot, I navigate the crowded yet familiar path down Machinery Hill into the heart of the Fairgrounds to the venerable Tom Thumb booth, next to the Old Mill boat ride (better known as the Tunnel of Love). Photos outside the Old Mill tout fourth- and fifth-generation boat riders, high school sweeties now married for sixty years, and I'll bet that all of them ate Tom Thumb donuts. I take my place in line at the booth and happily await my turn.

Watching the donut-making process is an integral part of the Tom Thumb experience. Four machines, looking like two-drawer file cabinets, squat eye-level on the counters side by side. A semi-clear plastic pitcher of creamy batter rests atop each machine. At the bottom of each machine is a device that opens and closes, allowing tiny donut inner tubes to be squirted onto the top of a corkscrew-like waterslide filled with hot oil. As the embryonic donut slowly slides down and around, the part that's in the oil turns crispy and golden. Then, a nifty little spatula gadget flips the donut over to even things up. At the end of the ride another spatula flips the perfectly browned donut into a clear holding box right next to your nose if you're forty-seven inches high.

I step up and place my order - sixteen in a bag for just three bucks! As I watch, a kid dips each donut in a vat of cinnamon sugar before dropping it into the translucent red waxed paper bag that boasts a cartoon picture of Tom Thumb sitting on a feather, looking a little like Pinocchio without the nose. He hands over the warm sack jammed with tiny sugared donuts, and I hope the drool doesn't show as I thank him.

I step to the side. I fish one donut out and test it with the tip of my tongue to make sure I won't burn myself, and then the hell with it. I cram the whole thing in as I reach for the next

one. Nirvana! Slightly crispy, cinnamony, hot, sweet, greasy, and yes, light as a feather. My tongue is smiling.

Imitators come and go, but Tiny Tim and Mighty Mini can't hold a candle to a Tom Thumb donut on the first day of the State Fair. I cadge an unused wax paper bag from the young person at the register, a souvenir to post on my bulletin board at work.

After swallowing Tom Thumbs (and I do mean that in the naughty sense), it's time to wallow in the glorification of all things Minnesotan, and so we wander through the streets to take it all in.

The Department of Agriculture is celebrating this year's theme, "From Field to Fork: Keeping Food Safe" by handing out free green pencils that say "Wash Your Hands for Safety." We wonder who in Marketing came up with these motivators, and try not to be bitter in the knowledge that they assuredly make more money than we do.

The Agriculture Building, a gracious WPA-era Art Deco pavilion, is also home to the Crop Art gallery. The goal here is to make pictures using seeds, husks, and other crop parts. Three walls – big walls – are crammed with earnest artwork, including a special feature by a lady who has dedicated her life to creating Crop Art portraits of an incongruous assortment of famous people including Richard Nixon, (the artist formerly known as) Prince, Pope John Paul II, Princess Di, and Jesse Ventura. Move over, black velvet, we got Elvis in soybeans.

Then it's on down the wide, crowded street to the Milk Promotion Board tent for All-You-Can-Drink milk for fifty cents. When I was in high school it cost a dime. Our teenage gang would get together, descend upon the tent en masse, and drink the supply tanker truck dry. The intent was to rile the Milk Promotion people, normally a placid, wholesome set of folks dressed

in white T-shirts. Sometimes our tactics worked, but usually they caught on before things got out of hand and very politely asked us to be considerate of others, a Minnesota-nice tactic that still works on me today.

As the afternoon heat falls on our shoulders, we amble over to the Swine Barn. It's like walking past the cosmetics aisles in Dayton's department store when the fragrance ladies are working; all comers are enveloped in a cloud of scent.

We inhale the richness of dusty hay and hog. We walk down the hay-strewn aisles between stalls where enormous panting animals lie, like beached manatees, oblivious of their competitive status or epicurean future. We wiggle in through the crowd to peer over the wooden fence for a glimpse of the 1,200-pound Big Pig. Make comparisons to the Queen Elizabeth II. We stop at the Pork Producers Association booth and don our free pink Pig Ear headbands, made of construction paper and provided by cheerful, freckled future pork producers.

The sun is angling to the west as we leave the Swine Barn. A couple of blocks to our left, the Midway rides are in full spin, while the sound-check from tonight's featured country band spills over from the Grandstand. As we blink in the sudden dust and heat, the crowd parts to let a very large, tawny cow through, led – well, pushed, really – by a 10- or 12-year-old girl, the kind of kid you'd see at a mall in Colorado or Louisiana arguing with her mom about getting an iPhone. But here she is in a pony-tail and streaked 4-H T-shirt, wiped out tired because she's been sleeping in a cattle trailer for a week with her family who all came in from Canby or Murdock out by the Dakota border, and holding back tears. The flash of silk on the animal's halter tells us she got the red ribbon, not the blue. We see disappointment meet frustration as she struggles to lead the equally upset heifer back to its stall. Her dad emerges from the crowd and

sensing her misery, takes the halter rope and throws his shoulder into the effort. The trio – dad, daughter, 4-H project cow, move on up the crowded pathway.

We angle through baby strollers and doublewide ladies in polyester pants to the Dairy Barn. Our mission: to inspect the Butter Heads. This is an Only in Minnesota event, that has always struck me as an odd way to celebrate our dairy heritage and a very odd prize for winning a beauty pageant.

Each year, Dairy Princesses from each of the state’s eighty-seven counties vie for the much-coveted statewide title of “Princess Kay of the Milky Way.” The Princess Kay tiara is awarded on the basis of speaking ability, enthusiasm, knowledge of the dairy industry, and general character. The big deal—and what all the girls aspire to—is that the dozen finalists are honored at the State Fair by having their heads sculpted in butter, an eight-hour process that takes place in a forty-degree freezer while viewed by a constant stream of fairgoers. As Dave Barry says, I am not making this up.

The action takes place in the high-ceilinged Dairy Barn, past miles of stalls housing placid, well-scrubbed cows, in a glass-walled refrigerated room, remodeled a year or so ago to accommodate more viewers and now billed as a “better butter booth.” In the center of this booth is a revolving display case with a dozen shelves that, on Opening Day, each hold an eighteen-inch-square, ninety-pound block of butter. It’s forty degrees inside.

Each day of the fair, a different finalist dons her mittens and winter jacket and perches on a stool inside the booth, on display to the crowd, while a sculptor (a woman who has done this for thirty-seven years) carves a likeness of the girl’s head from one of the butter blocks. Each day there is one less butter block and one more sculpted head slowly turning in the display case. Princess Kay’s head gets a real tiara. After the fair, the girls can take their butter heads home.

Some donate them to charity. Others keep them for a year in their parents' freezer like a piece of wedding cake.

It is always best to end a fair day on the noisy Midway, with its whips and carnies and drops and thrills. We stroll through the carnival, amazed that there is still a *Magnum, PI* ride featuring huge paintings of actor Tom Selleck.

The camel race game is a perennial favorite if only for its sheer political incorrectness. Against a desert scene backdrop, running the length of the booth is a "racecourse." On the booth's right side await ten painted tin camels, each about two feet high, poised with noses out ahead and legs flying. Patrons, seated lunch-counter style, each claim a camel and attempt to advance their charges by manipulating foosball-like paddles to drop balls into a hole. Each ball successfully dropped makes the camel advance a few inches. The goal is to make one's camel move all the way over to the left and cross the "finish line."

The barker calls it like a pro: "And they're off! Four gets a quick lead, but here comes Eight up the middle, now it's Eight—yes folks, the Ay-Rabs are taking a beating here at the State Fair today. Now we got Four back on the inside, but here comes Three. Now Three, now Three now Three, here comes Seven! It's Seven up the straight for the win!"

The Ferris Wheel lights up the dark sky and tanned blonde girls scream as they whip around on the garishly-lit rides. Clean-cut boys in muscle shirts carry four-foot high stuffed panda bears, trophies of their budding machismo. It's time to turn the fair over to the young people and take the aging, tired feet and dusty bodies on the long hike back to the car, and home.

The Minnesota State Fair is the greater sum of all our parts: democratic, stalwart, fat, a little dumb, and not quite hip to the high-speed access, iPodded, urban, jittery, twenty-first century world.

It's reliable. It serves as a reminder that that there are still farmers who ride green John Deere tractors through fields of tall corn; that some women still have time to create new Jell-O salad recipes, and that uncertain teenagers roam in packs and look exactly the same as they did twenty-five years ago.

It's a community that gathers each year to remind each other that the earth we plow and turn and scrub from our fingernails has rhythms and forces greater than us.

We are Minnesotans, a people with few growing days in our agricultural calendar and too many long frozen nights ahead of us. We're drunk on summer, high on spun cotton candy and Schlitz beer, but we know the golden-green days are a-dying and and if we look over our shoulders we see the long dark cold gaining on us. But we also know that, eventually, if we work hard and pray enough, the snow will melt and corn will rise again from the black dirt, and there will be Tom Thumb donuts at the State Fair.

It's Minnesota on a stick.

## Bird of Prey

It snowed yesterday in New Orleans. Inexperienced Southerners tend to label any freezing rain or its varieties as snow, but yesterday we had an honest snowfall that stuck around long enough for measurable accumulation. The young Vietnamese couple across the street took pictures of each other and threw tentative snowballs. Photos flew across cell phones. Kids and their grownups made their first snowmen. It was a magical day of squeals and delight, something we've been a little short of lately. Snow can do that, that bringing on of wonder, maybe because it turns any landscape – no matter how devastated - into a clean sheet of paper, awaiting the tracks of possibility.

I'm a Minnesotan by birth, from a place where the act of seeking winter's magic is more psychological survival skill than serendipity. Awe is hard to come by as the leftover slush from an April blizzard fills your shoes. But I grew up in the woods and fields, and little miracles were all around me—the red flash of a cardinal, a deer track up a narrow ravine after a blizzard or a brave green shoot under the crusty March snow—small delights that, cumulatively, gave life balance and the knowledge that it is always possible to discover magical things in cold, unlikely places.

When I was about twelve, our family was graced with a magic visitor, big magic, unicorn-level magic. In our case, though, it wasn't an unreal unicorn, it was a very real bird of the night.

Our house was hidden far off a road on the edges of suburbia, surrounded by seven acres of thick oak woods. It was an angular Prairie School statement cantilevered out over a deep, bowl-shaped valley. The architectural concept was to connect humans and nature, thus the

house, built amidst the treetops, featured walls of floor-to-ceiling windows – a twenty-four-hour Forest Channel for our viewing pleasure. In summer we, like the birds, were hidden amidst the shimmering green leaves, punctuated by flashes of avian color. Indigo buntings and scarlet tanagers, stodgy yet mellifluous rose-breasted grosbeaks, and burbling brown house wrens visited our numerous feeders and we always had binoculars to hand.

But as each summer waned the orioles and tanagers headed south, and we developed a new appreciation for the winter birds, the dusky blue nuthatches, the siskins and crossbills with their tinges of pink and yellow.

In September the forest's palette wheeled all too quickly from gold-green promise to yellow to fiery orange-red finality, then to the grays and browns of winter. The view from our forest perch changed dramatically as leaves cascaded to the ground, leaving naked branches and a new, broad view of the valley below open to us.

Old Mac, our venerable Golden Retriever, liked to keep an eye on things, and he loved the expanded views. He spent his winter days lying on the dining room floor, snout resting on the windowsill, grizzled nose pressed to the cold glass, watching. Every once in a while a low growl vibrated from his throat. I'd abandon my algebra to crouch beside him, and strain to spy what he saw far below on the valley floor. Sometimes it was a deer, almost perfectly camouflaged as it slowly picked its way through the grayish brown dusk. Sometimes it was a fox, russet, furtive in the cold.

In 1971, when I was in seventh grade, the winter was particularly wicked. Blizzards raged across the upper Midwest from late October well into April. We spent most of January and February in an arctic deep freeze; over a three-day period in early February the high never



broke zero and lows hovered around minus twenty. E.B. White called it “the Winter of the Great Snows,” and although he was in Maine, the title worked as well for Minnesota.

At the forty-fifth parallel winter nights are interminably long. You start thinking that hibernation makes sense. Why bother getting out of bed? On New Year’s Day of that year the sun officially rose at ten minutes to eight in the morning and set less than eight hours later, at quarter to five in the evening. The relentless weather only exacerbated the sense of interminable cold and endless darkness.

My mother liked having the outside spotlights on while we ate dinner so we could enjoy the stark beauty of the snow-piled branches through our wall of windows. So it was that, one night around the first of the year, as we were all bringing out the food from the kitchen, I flicked on the floodlights before taking my seat. By habit we all looked out, and then we froze.

Perched on a snowy oak branch about ten feet away sat a barred owl, its round head swiveling and large eyes staring at us. “Turn off the dining room light!” Mom immediately commanded. With the inside lights off, the owl had less chance of seeing us and being spooked by our movements. Slowly, slowly we edged into our chairs, watching the owl, puffed up against the cold, head swiveling occasionally at some night sound. He stayed on that branch a long time, looking at us. Finally, we dared to start eating and glanced away for just a moment, but when we looked back, he was gone.

Someone fetched the Robert’s *Birds of Minnesota*. Barred owls have round faces, brown eyes, with grayish brown and white stripes (bars) across their chests. They seem big but they’re virtual lightweights: they stand twenty inches tall but only weigh a pound and a half, thus they lack the power of, say, a red-winged hawk to catch prey on the wing. Nonetheless, they are ably armed for hunting: their talons can rotate to facilitate grabbing, and, with a wingspan over four

feet across, they can glide and dive with great purpose and majesty. They dine from an extensive menu of mice, voles, squirrels and other rodents, lizards, and insects. One of our country's most common owls, they are often heard but rarely seen.

Growing up in that house and at our summer cabin on the St. Croix River, I was no stranger to the hoots and shrieks of various owl species. In fact, I've always thought of the barred owl's call as emblematic of the cabin, of wild places and golden summers. It is so redeeming to hear, in the warm blue July dusk, an authoritative "Hoo hoo hoo hoo hoo HOO-Ahhhhh!" coming from the island in the middle of the river.

But while the barred owls' calls were indelibly stamped on my forested summer nights, the owls themselves remained a secret, invisible amidst the leafy darkness.

Owls spook a lot of people. They symbolize evil in many cultures, servants of witches and portents of bad news. But other peoples see the owl as representing good magic, the symbol of wisdom and a source of guidance. For me, seeing a barred owl fifteen feet from my dinner plate at the edge of January was, if not symbolic, at least an affirmation of the possibilities of wonder.

The next night we switched on the outside light and the owl was again perched on the branch. Again, we sat in darkness, watching it. After a half an hour or so it hunched its shoulders a bit and lifted off, effortlessly gliding through the trees into the arctic darkness.

It was there the next night, and the next. It looked at us, we at it.

It was simply magical to my younger sister and me, but it was also clear to the grown-ups that the bird was in trouble. My mom remembers that realization with typical succinctness. "It came to our woods because the lemmings were all frozen. All the owls were coming down from the north that winter - there was a Snowy Owl on the University of Minnesota campus."

“Put yourself in the place of that owl,” she reminded me. “There’s a big building with lights and human smells, and you’re so hungry that you go there? It didn’t take much to figure it out what was happening.”

My then-stepfather consulted with the Owl Guy at the university’s James Ford Bell Natural History Museum, who agreed that the bird was probably starving due to the severe winter and was desperately seeking sustenance.

Barred owls, he detailed, locate their prey mostly by sound, not by sight, and the unusually heavy snowfall was muffling the pitter-patter of little rodent feet at the same time as the extreme cold was decimating the rodent and small bird populations (hence Mom’s “frozen lemmings”). The food shortages were forcing owls to take desperate measures: flying far from their territory, hunting by day, or coming uncomfortably near humans.

Perhaps our owl was attracted to the activity around our birdfeeders: barred owls can’t catch birds on the wing but they can perch nearby and pounce on any critter scrabbling for a few sunflower seeds underneath the feeders.

As my stepfather relayed this to us at dinner the hungry owl sat a few feet away, watching.

Mom’s not sure how we actually came to the owl-feeding strategy. She remembers the consultation with the Owl Guy, but she credits us with figuring out the solution. You couldn’t just buy a bag of Purina Owl Chow and leave some out in the woods. We tried dead mice – carcasses from traps and leftovers from my stepfather’s lab– putting them out on the deck or tossing them down in the woods, but they sank in the snow or froze into small daubs amidst the forested landscape, outside an owl’s vision or interest.

The key, Mom remembers, was finally realizing that the food had to be moving. “I don’t know when we learned that it needed living food, that it would only eat something it thought was alive. That was the trick, though, that it would only go after live prey. It wouldn’t take it if it was dead.”

Releasing live mice was cruel and impractical; the snow was so deep that they would immediately sink out of sight and then freeze to death, and there was no guarantee that the owl would hear or see them.

The adults mulled it over and came up with a plan. After dinner, with the owl outside, my stepfather produced from the kitchen a spool of gossamer cotton thread and a plate with a few pieces of cut-up stewing beef.

The rest of us watched, rapt, as he tied the end of the thread around a mouse-size chunk of meat. Someone turned out the interior lights. He knelt and slowly cranked open the window behind his dinner chair, the one that looked out over the trail down through the woods. Arctic air streamed in.

The owl ruffled with alarm. It hunched, ready to flee.

With a flick my stepfather tossed the baited line out the window. The little chunk of meat sailed out through the dark and down thirty feet or so to the hill below the house. (Chunks of stewing beef are denser and solved a problem posed in beta-testing: real mice didn’t weigh enough to get sufficient lift.)

The meat came to rest upon the smooth path we kids had packed down with our toboggans, a dark blot on the firmly-packed moonlit snow. If it had landed anywhere else it would have sunk into the deep drifts.

My stepfather pursed his lips against the fleshy area between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, making a sucking noise that imitates the desperate squeak of a mouse in danger.

Now the owl was interested. It swiveled its head to find the source of the sound and shifted its feet on the branch.

While making the squeaky noise with his left hand, my stepfather used his right hand to pull jerkily on the string, causing the meat to jump along the path. It became a mouse in distress, caught in the open. The squeaking cracked across the subzero air. The owl stared intently at the dark jerking shape. It tensed, hunched its shoulders, and launched straight down in a sudden, silent, and breathtaking swoop. Almost too late, my stepfather snapped the line as the owl grabbed the “mouse” in his talons and lifted off, away into the darkness, leaving behind a feathered whisper and a gossamer cotton contrail.

We were frozen, thrilled, and somewhat in shock. Not only had the experiment worked, but we’d just seen this incredible wild creature catching its prey in the dark. We felt privileged, chosen humans allowed a glimpse of a magical night world.

I worried about the string. Wouldn’t it catch the owl on a branch, or tangle up its insides? No, I was reassured, it was thin enough to break easily, and cotton was digestible and biodegradable. Owls are able to pass bones, fur and feathers through their systems. Thin cotton thread was not a problem.

The owl, clearly, was no worse for wear when it showed up the next night and again swooped down on the fake mouse being tugged up the sledding path on a string. Those first couple of weeks it was very nervous about the whole process, head rotating, alarmed at any noise, sometimes flying off as we opened the window, but usually returning after a short time. I’m not sure what was weirder, that it happened at all or that it kept on happening.

Life became surreal. I'd wake in the dark dawn and walk with my little sister through the woods and up the road to the bus, wind whipping across the neighbor's barren pasture right through our jackets and skin to freeze our very inner core. I'd be an awkward seventh grader for a few hours, take the bus home and trudge back down our road. I did my homework as the deep orange winter sunset threw the trees into black silhouette outside my bedroom window. Then we'd eat dinner, wrap ourselves in coats and sleeping bags, open the window – keep in mind it was below zero – and with inside lights out and outside floods on, one of us would make the squeaky noise. A few minutes later, from out of the darkness the broad bright wings floated into view, soundless, taking form as the majestic creature landed fifteen feet away, nothing but snow and night between us. “It *was* surreal,” my mother says. “Remember, it was being *called*, a wild thing appearing out of the dark.” I remember it being powerful magic to be twelve and thirteen and able to summon a unicorn out of the forest.

My favorite spot was the kitchen window closest to the pantry wall. I'd snuggle in my corner in the open window, listening to the silence of the frozen night and the soundless whish of air on quiet wings. It was all so silent, the woods wrapped in a blanket of snow, cold making the dark more so. We never heard the owl. “That was something,” Mom remembered. “There was never a noise. We heard them call all the time in the summer, but we never heard it in the winter.”

We made noises, though, but each night the owl spooked a little less when we cracked the window open, or at our hushed conversations, or the phone ringing. (“Can I call you back? I have to feed the owl.”)

It snowed relentlessly. The freeze deepened. At night each tree limb and twig glittered and the air sparkled with Arctic pixie dust. The owl, floodlit, gleamed against the blackness,

alive, magical. “I’ll never forget that visual,” my mother says. “The way that majestic creature shone, just shone in that light.”

I’ve compared the feeding process to fishing, but Mom isn’t happy with that analogy. “No,” she said firmly, “it’s not like fishing, because an owl is mystical and a muskie isn’t.”

Sometimes we’d think the owl wasn’t around only to find it on a different branch. Sometimes it would sneak up after we’d sat down to dinner. My sister would be protesting the quantity of peas she was being requested to consume when someone else would glance out the window and say, “Hey, the owl’s here!”

We grew blasé. Cut-up stewing beef and, later, hot dogs became grocery list staples. My mother, a harried arts executive, once stopped at the politically-correct Lund’s Grocery after work and distractedly asked the butcher for “a pound of owl meat.” Heads turned. Realizing her *faux pas*, she played into it as only my mother could. “Not any of that cheap Great Horned stuff,” she dramatically warned the man behind the counter. “We want only your best Barred Owl. We’re having important people in for a barbecue this weekend.”

The owl left no tracks, nor much evidence it existed at all. The snow was too deep for much woodland exploration, but every so often, at the end of a toboggan run or while following a deer trail, I’d spy a white string wrapped around branches, or find owl droppings along the path, yards of thin cotton thread coiled tightly in the compact pellets.

Usually the owl flew off after it hit the bait, but one night it returned to its favorite branch outside the dining room after it ate. We broke out laughing at the sight of that solemn symbol of

wisdom, string hanging from its beak, looking exactly like a five-year-old showing off what he can do with spaghetti.

Adding to the surrealness was the inability to share the experience with my peers, who spent their evenings at basketball practice and learning to socialize. Explaining the scene to the kids at school was impossible; they just flat-out didn't believe me, and my attempts to pursue the subject only cemented my geek status in their junior hierarchy. Adult visitors to our house were mesmerized, but I don't know if they realized that it was such an on-going thing.

March seemed to last forever, but eventually the raging snowstorms became milder in the face of the warming earth, yielding to the inevitable changing of the seasons. The Chinook winds blew and icicles dripped all night. One night, and then the next, there was no owl. It no longer needed our aid.

Reality set back in. Spring melted into summer and then fall, our winter adventure moving further back in our minds, logged as an anomaly, an odd tale of the woods.

Heavy snow fell again the following winter, and it fell early. Christmas passed, and somewhere around Epiphany we flipped on the outside lights before dinner and there it sat, waiting expectantly. What joy! Our owl was back! We scrambled to defrost a hot dog and find the cotton thread. It returned again, nightly, and we quickly slipped into our old routine: eat dinner, wrap ourselves up, turn off the lights, and huddle by the open windows. The small dark piece of meat squiggled across the moonlit snow, the owl swooped, feather-encased talons hit the mark, and up it flew into the night, again leaving only a contrail of string and a whisper of feathers. But again, as we heard the first drips of the spring thaw, it melted away into the wet, bare woods.



I turned fourteen in December of 1973, when the owl showed up for its last winter with us. Again it just appeared on a branch outside the window. But before we could hurry for hot dogs and bread, a second owl swooped up out of the darkness, stopping on a branch a little farther away, where it perched nervously.

The second owl watched with great interest as the first owl demonstrated how to pounce on the little piece of meat as it jerked up the hillside. Rather than disappear into the woods after feeding, the first owl pulled up to a tree some yards away, barely in sight. The new owl was skittish. We threw down another line of bait and had to jiggle it a lot, letting the hot dog slide back down the path, then jerking back up. Finally the second owl launched, a silent taloned rocket shot towards earth, wings reversing the thrust almost before its claws pierced its prey, wings that carried it into the woods, Owl Number One close behind.

They were a twosome. We experimented with simultaneous feedings, but strings got tangled and it was too complicated. We concluded they just had to take turns. After that introductory night the new owl always ate first, and took off immediately into the darkness.

The presence of the two together told us more about “our” owl: barred owls leave their parents after their first year but don’t mate until their third year away from the home nest. They mate for life, and often hunt together. Backtracking, we figured that when our owl found us it was an inexperienced hunter spending its first winter alone amidst the harshest of conditions.

They didn’t come every night. More often than not we squeaked away in vain, finally closing the window, disappointed but accepting. After a few days, though, one or both would appear, them expectant, us relieved.

It was a much milder winter, with hunting easier for the maturing birds. Their visits became less frequent, and as February melted into March the two owls faded into the gray woods forever, presumably to hatch and raise their first clutch of owlets.

The next winter we watched and squeaked and hoped, but no owls. We never saw them again outside our winter window.

When reflecting upon our winters with the owl, my mother offered the story of a young woman she knew who studied wolves in Alaska. “One night the woman came home,” Mom said, “and there was a wolf on her doorstep, a wild wolf that was very sick. She opened the door and it walked into her house, waited while she built a fire, and lay down in front of the fire. It needed to be warm, and knew where to find warmth. She made no attempt to approach it, and when it needed to leave, she let it out. She’d earned the trust of the wolf pack and that particular wolf, but made no attempt to compromise its wildness.

“That was the thing about the owl. It brought to us wildness and mysticism. We weren’t rescuing an owl. This huge mystical thing materialized out of the darkness, starving.”

“It was,” she said, “like the unicorn coming out of the forest and needing food.”

It wasn’t “our” owl. It wasn’t anything we could tame. Yes, it was *called*, as Mom says, but it was still very much a wild creature of the snow, a unicorn arriving on shining wings.

Now, some thirty years later, I see in my mind the gray feathered face with the big brown eyes staring in through the window, illuminated against the Arctic darkness. I feel the cold, rough brick floor on my bare feet as I crouch by the open window, freezing in the subzero air. I hear the quiet breath of gray-brown wings, and breathe myself, deeply. There is magic in the woods and the dark, and in the snow that floats like feathers from the night sky.

## From A to Z

From an airplane Mount Sopris looks like just another peak in the Elk Range. It's almost thirteen thousand feet high, but it tends to get dwarfed amidst its taller Rocky Mountain neighbors like the Maroon Bells and other Colorado Fourteeners. From the ground, though, Sopris looms large across the lower Roaring Fork Valley, resembling the mountain you drew in kindergarten, a stretched-out triangle with a snowy top. It presides, a benevolent protector, over all those who live in its shadow, especially those in the little town of Carbondale.

Snuggled against the foot of the mountain and edged by the Crystal and Roaring Fork rivers, Carbondale has boomed and busted with coal mining and real estate cycles for over a hundred years. But after the mines played out in the mid-1970s, and before its marrow was sucked out by the Aspen tourist economy forty miles away, Carbondale lay asleep, an isolated Brigadoon, occupied by a close-knit community of disparate interests that included hippies, miners, drunks, conspiracy theorists, lawyers, and Republican ranchers.

Nineteen-eighty-one was a banner year for the little town. They finally paved Main Street, for one thing. More important to this story, though, is that was the year a small hippie contingent traveled over McClure's Pass south to Telluride for the infant bluegrass festival, and then got too high to drive home. Seeking a place to crash, they stumbled upon KOTO, a tiny college-style radio station that played music otherwise unattainable in those pre-cable, pre-webcast days and in that mountainous terrain. The contingent decided that Carbondale needed a radio station, too.

Small-town civic projects usually revolve around new soccer fields or a senior center, but in this instance a radio station made perfect sense as a way to bring the community together, to

broadcast ballgames and provide an intelligent soundtrack to life. I sound like an old-timer, but back then getting any broadcast signal – radio or TV – was almost impossible for mountain residents. It’s one thing to stick a ten-watt tower up in Minnesota where the sound waves rolls unimpeded across the prairie, but it’s another to have to contend with fourteen-thousand-foot mountains surrounding your transmitter.

So the hippies made friends with the ranchers and even a lawyer, wrote grants and scavenged equipment, and on April 15, 1983 KDNK went on the air from a second-story room in the coal-heated Dinkel Building, a former rooming house attempting to survive as retail space.

“Funky” is the best word to describe both the station and the programming. The misfit DJ crew included the mayor, the Republican rancher-turned-congressman, and an eighty-year-old City Councilwoman who once drove a sleigh to teach in a one-room schoolhouse. I’d moved to the valley that same year, and when someone found out I’d worked at my college station, I got drafted into the KDNK volunteer army. At first I programmed a blues show and sold underwriting, but eventually I worked my way into a paid position right about the time a fellow Midwesterner named Julie Ross became manager. The two of us became deep friends and for almost ten years we held the place together with duct tape and speaker wire. We sustained high drama levels and maintained higher levels of fun.

Eighteen hundred people hemmed in by narrow roads, a dozen bars, and a lot of snow. Long winters and too much isolation cause people in northern small towns to either kill each other or cooperate for survival. Sometimes that cooperation meant doing zany things, like staging a late-winter Talent Show in a borrowed pole building where everyone let loose. One year the entire police force (all four officers) performed the “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies” in pink tutus, while Julie and I, squished into way-too-mini spandex outfits, billed ourselves as the Radio

Sluts from Hell and sang “Money Honey” to a disturbingly enthusiastic audience eager to stuff cash in our fishnets. I vaguely remember there being a lot of tequila involved, and the next afternoon, when I woke up, still in my Slut Wear, phoning Julie to remark that there seemed to be lots of dollar bills in my bed. She remarked there were lots of dollar bills in her bed, too, and all in all we made enough to buy the station a new tape deck, quite a coup in those lean years.

I tell you all this to try to paint of Carbondale before Internet technology opened the door to Californication and the valley’s ruin. Now it’s like anywhere else, filled with empty third homes and speculative golf course communities planned by greedy developers and approved by equally greedy city councils. But when I lived there in the eighties and early nineties, it really was a Brigadoon.

The Carbondale I knew was still the kind of village that collectively raised its children. It was a place where a storekeeper, seeing a hooky-playing child through her window on a weekday morning, phoned the truant’s mother, who then met the miscreant in the middle of Main Street as he rounded the corner by the Post Office. You can’t get away with much in that type of village, and a lot of us got raised up despite ourselves.

Andy Zanca started out on the fringes of that Carbondale village. He was about ten when he found KDNK. It was autumn when his slim figure first appeared in the station’s doorway. He matched the landscape, I thought, with his red-gold hair and wide mahogany eyes set in a cherubic, freckled face. He came in search of a job. He’d seen our classified ad in the *Valley Journal* seeking DJs and thought that it might be a way he could earn money. We explained to him that there was no pay, that we were a non-profit entity looking for volunteers to fill programming shifts. Andy was crushed. But, given that we had vast black holes of dead air across

our broadcast schedule and were desperate for warm bodies to spin records, and recognizing the value of an eager warm body in the studio as compared with the reluctant warm bodies we invariably had to hunt down and drag off barstools to fill slots, we did the truly KDNK thing: we put ten-year-old Andy on the air.

At first we partnered him with another boy for a weekly show called “Kids Beat.” The two boys were supposed to play teen music and discuss school issues, but mostly they read and offered commentary on the school lunch menus, interspersed with a few Top Forty tunes. They were hilarious. Two ten-year-old kids trying to describe the Cook’s Choice entrée, laughing so hard they couldn’t talk. You could almost see the milk coming out of their noses.

We were impressed by Andy’s intelligence, diligence, and sweetness, and we started to learn a little more about him. Julie once said Andy was the closest thing Carbondale would ever have to a street kid, and she was right. He lived on the edge of town in the most run-down of the trailer parks with a herd of cats and his invalid mother, who relished in telling us how sick she was, how her husband abandoned her, and how, because of the booze and drugs she consumed during her pregnancy, Andy was “damaged.” Damaged. She used that word a lot. Yes, he was hyperactive – his fourth-grade teacher told us she would “put him in a corner and just let him bounce.” He had a short frustration fuse and a tendency for the random, mis-placed dramatic gesture. But we didn’t see any of those traits as a crime, or as evidence of damage. We saw them as logical components of a normal young boy growing up in very challenging circumstances. Either one of us could very easily be walking in his shoes. He wanted to learn, he wanted to do good. We thought Andy ranked a lot higher on the normal chart than many of the adults we dealt with.

Moreover, Andy was resourceful and fiercely independent. He wanted the “job” at KDNK so he could buy parts for his beloved yet battered bicycle. That bike got him to school and the grocery store or down Main Street in a hurry, but most of all, it got him out of the trailer park and away from his mother, who didn’t have a car. He needed to keep it going.

At KDNK we started making work for Andy, giving him odd jobs when we could find a few extra dollars. He began showing up every day after school. We’d hear him coming down the hall, his level of huffing telling us how his school day had gone. He’d detour into the studio, shed his backpack and blue baseball jacket onto the vintage orange corduroy couch, and finally arrive in the office door for greetings and instructions.

In those early days his hands never stopped moving. Unless they had something better to do he unconsciously snapped his right thumb and fingers into the palm of his left hand over and over, body rocking slightly from side to side.

So we put those hands to work. We taught him how to strip speaker wire, coil microphone cables and splice tape. We sent him on errands to the post office or to get a pizza snack for all of us, slipping him a couple of bucks along the way.

In the winter, snow piled up on the satellite dish, resulting in a scratchy or interrupted National Public Radio signal. Listeners called to complain they couldn’t hear “All Things Considered.” “Car Talk” wouldn’t tape correctly. These were our bread and butter programs, and we paid hefty dues to get them. We came to rely on Andy to climb through the bathroom window, drop the few feet down to the roof of the Dinkel Building annex, and armed with a broom, wade through the snow to sweep that day’s accumulation off the dish. He didn’t like it, but he did it.

In the studio, Andy’s quick and agile fingers matched his equally nimble mind. He soaked up everything we taught him about polarity, microphone placement, soldering, and the

finer points of remote broadcasting. We began thinking of him as our junior engineer (after all, his slim body could fit into all the really tight places) and over the years he came to understand the craft of radio production and the technical workings of our patched-together station better than many of our adult volunteers.

When his broadcasting partner lost interest, Andy took over the weekly teen radio program, and we expanded the time slot commensurate with his level of programming ability. As “Kid’s Beat” morphed into the “A to Z” show, the airwaves became Andy’s oyster. Those were pre-MP3 days, before Napster and iTunes made everything available all the time. For Andy, whose single-wide trailer held no CD- or record-player or even a cable TV connection, all music was new, and every song a discovery. The KDNK library was a pirate’s chest filled with musical pearls.

I remember the day he found the Rolling Stones. We were in the dingy production room/record library, a converted closet jammed with second-hand recording equipment and lined with floor-to-ceiling record shelves. Andy spent a lot of time in that stuffy room, working his way through the music library and fiddling around with the gear. That day he’d been checking out music for his show and wanted to share something with me. He bent down to the “R”s, and pulled out *Sticky Fingers*, the original album with the real zipper in the cover. “Have you ever heard these guys?” he asked excitedly, holding up the record jacket. “They’re COOL!”

Innocent of genre and heedless of public opinion, Andy Zanca formatted his radio show in the true spirit of KDNK’s eclectic programming style. We taught him the basic rules of radio: never play two bad songs in a row, bring the listener with you, and always do the top-of-the-hour ID. He had a gift for transitions and rolled his eyes with practiced teenage ennui whenever I wasted my breath trying to teach him about zippers, music beds, and other formal radio pro-



gramming tools. He loved doing stupid music tricks like sandwiching some cheesy lambada between the B-52s' "Quiche Lorraine" and "When You're a Jet" from *West Side Story*. Only Andy could get away with that, only on KDNK.

Around town, people sometimes referred to him as our gofer or our mascot, but I always thought that was demeaning. To us, Andy was a sweet kid with copper hair and a heart of gold, a hard worker, mostly reliable, always resourceful. He was a quick study, and he tried hard to learn to work through his frustrations when he couldn't get something right. He was special, but he wasn't Special Ed; he was simply a member of our extended KDNK and Carbondale family.

That said, Andy was my junior wingman. Because his mom didn't have a car, Andy's world was defined by the reaches of his bicycle and the bus. I loved taking him with me on errands or to stay overnight with me and my husband. On one hand I was engaging in the noble cause to give him experiences and perspective, but on the other, he was funny and gave me perspective. We goofed around a lot, going on little hikes and adventures to the hot pool and McDonalds twelve miles away in Glenwood Springs.

Andy was also just like any other teenager coming to grips with all the petty and profound questions posed during adolescence. As with so many exceptional people, he was faced with exceptional challenges. It's hard to be on welfare when you live next door to Aspen. When we met him he didn't have many friends – he was the poor kid, the geek, the hyper student who drove the teachers nuts.

When things were really rough he'd get deep blue wrinkles under his eyes, and a hollow look. We knew that for him KDNK was a safe place, a chance to be somebody and be accepted in the adult world, undamaged. Upstairs in the Dinkel Building, Andy knew he could cadge a

dollar to buy a slice of pizza at Pepino's, find a listening ear to tell a tale about one of his many cats, or an advocate to step in when there was trouble at school.

Andy grew up at KDNK, but Julie and I grew up with Andy. Neither one of us had children, but with Andy we learned to work through puberty issues, moral decisions – things that parents of teenagers have to deal with. There was the deodorant discussion, and the time we caught him stealing quarters from the pop machine. Julie and I often asked each other how we got our values, comparing our own upbringings, dissecting how we knew right from wrong with the hope that we could apply that newly-identified formula for Andy's benefit.

When Andy did something wrong or embarrassing, or got chastised, he'd let his frustrations get to him and get mad, and we wouldn't see him for a few days. Eventually he'd reappear, or one of us would track him down, shake him by the scruff of the neck and give him a hug, and we'd all be okay again.

Each time we had a parental encounter I learned that love means setting limits and being the bad guy. I had to uphold my basic values (after I figured out what they were), call him on his shit, and praise him when he excelled, and do it all with the utmost respect and gentleness.

Andy was there for me, too. When Jon Pareles wrote a *New York Times* op-ed piece complaining that there weren't any radio stations like the fictional KBER in the then-popular show *Northern Exposure*, I was outraged. I spent that entire Monday crafting the perfect response. At dinner-time Andy stuck his head in to say goodnight. I was pulling the final letter from the printer. "Read this," I said. "This guy is so wrong. Whaddya think?" He read it. "Send it," he said, handing the paper back to me. I did, they published it, CNN picked up the story and *USAToday* came calling.

In the summer of 1992 there was a huge airfare war with a two-for-one deal, and I impulsively bought Andy a plane ticket to accompany me to Minnesota to visit my parents for the Fourth of July. I think the act was prompted by a smart-ass comment he made about wanting to see land that was really flat, instead of the dumb, boring mountains he'd been stuck in all his life.

As the United Express jet climbed out of Aspen he was silent, hands lying still on his thighs. He gained years of perspective with each thousand feet of altitude, riveted to the window watching the mountains give way to the Great Plains and the green Midwest. Hours later, as we wound our way through the lush Minnesota countryside, he tried to be so cool, complaining that the land wasn't flat enough.

We spent three days at my dad's cabin, in the woods on a river. We went to parades and fireworks, paddled in the canoe, and ate the season's first sweet corn. I don't know who had more fun, him or me watching him as he experienced so many new things: his first airplane flight, his first night away from the Roaring Fork Valley, his first time in a boat.

The last night was cold, so after dinner we built a fire in the giant limestone fireplace (another first) and Andy had a great time fussing with the logs. My dad and stepmom went to bed. I crashed on the couch with a book while Andy hunched in the chair next to the fireplace, poker in hand, contemplating the flames the same way I did when I was fourteen.

I was watching him watch the fire when he turned, met my gaze directly, and asked point blank, "Why did you bring me here?"

I put down my book. I breathed in and out. I thought all kinds of things I could say that would be true. Because I could? Because it's the neatest place on the planet and I want to share it with you? Because I can't resist an airfare sale? Because it's fun to have a partner along for

the ride? Because I'm trying to distract myself from a disintegrating marriage? Because I love you?

When I finally answered, I couldn't believe the triteness coming out of my mouth. "So that you could see that you have choices." He nodded, and we went back to being quiet and poking at the fire while internally I kicked myself for not connecting more, for sounding so much like a lame parent uttering meaningless platitudes.

As the seasons spun past, Andy entered high school and began finding friends. He got a free ski pass through school and spent his winter weekends snowboarding up at Aspen, and spent a lot less time hanging around the station. After he switched to a late-night time slot I hardly saw him at all. I'd hear him every week, though, deepened voice and deep musical knowledge, bringing the listener along, hitting the top of the hour ID with precision, and rarely playing two bad songs in a row.

Snows fell, summers were too short. I left my first husband and fell in love with somebody else. Julie got married and moved away. Andy's long-lost older half-sister returned to the valley and fell in love with Mark Wolfe, my neighbor and a long-time member of the KDNK family. They had a baby girl.

I saw Andy sometimes at Mark and Anne-Marie's. He was a shy uncle at first, but was getting the hang of it. He was so gentle with Megan, his strong hands steadying her tiny body against his chest. One night, during a party, I was holding forth in the crowded kitchen when Andy appeared in the doorway across the room, red hair gleaming. Our eyes caught: a "hey how ya doin you're grown but you can always come back and I love you" look. He got it, and a minute later he was gone, off to hang out with his own friends down by the river.

In the summer of 1995 I'd decided to join my new love in his home city of New Orleans, and was getting ready to make the big move. Andy and I went to a final lunch at the upscale Landmark Café down Main Street from the radio station. He had just graduated from high school and it was right around his birthday, so I planned on treating him to the meal, but when the check came he insisted on paying. He was working full-time for Hunter Electric and thus had a little jingle in his jeans, and he was so proud that *he* could pick up the tab.

We sat on the patio amidst pots of pink and yellow flowers and gazed up at Mount Sopris piercing the blue summer sky. The snowcap was receding, revealing the mountain's red-streaked gray rock underneath.

At our shady table on the porch the air was cool. We finished dessert and were quiet. Andy twirled his fingers nervously, looking down at his plate. I hadn't seen that in a while. I waited. Finally he asked me if I remembered the conversation we'd had in front of the fire that night in Minnesota.

I said I did.

He turned his face to me, grown-up eyes meeting mine. "I just wanted to say thank you," he said.

There wasn't much I could say to that, other than "you're welcome." But at that moment, with those amazing words, I thought, 'He's going to be okay. We got him through and he's going to be all right.'

We were quiet for a bit more, then the conversation, and our lives, moved on.

When something really awful is happening to me my brain tends to focus on some random detail. It's the way I avoid having to contend with the full scope of an immediate, painful situation. Once my car skidded off a mountain road, and even though it rolled three times down the side of the cliff, my extended internal video only recalls a split second when I was upside down and my own voice was coming from somewhere else, uttering the brilliant phrase, "Oh shit! I'm having an accident!"

And thus it was, exactly a year from that lovely summer lunch in the shadow of Mount Sopris, when the telephone rang in my New Orleans home just as I was coming in from a sunset run with the dogs. My new husband was out of town. Andy hadn't come down to the wedding but Anne-Marie did, bearing a gift from the KDNK family, a platter made for us by ceramicist and KDNK listener Diane Kenney-McCormick.

I got to the kitchen and picked up the receiver just before the answering machine kicked in. It was Mark Wolfe, twelve hundred miles away, barely recognizable through the sobbing. What he was saying was too big, too awful. His voice faded into the background, radio white noise as my brain focused on Diane's red clay platter, partially glazed, and its central design of fish and mountains. I stared at that piece of pottery isolated on the kitchen counter. I saw for the first time the difference in textures between the white glaze and the rough reddish clay. The fish design was particularly expressive and unique, and I marveled that the hash marks along the sides were made in groups of five. Why five? I wondered. The kitchen was dark except for the ceiling canister overhead, and the light shone down on the platter as piercingly as alpine sun through a magnifying glass on snow.

As inevitable as snow or fire, a no must become a yes, no matter how we try to distract ourselves. I had to absorb Mark's faraway words. The cops had found Andy a few hours earlier,

hanging from a tree down by the Crystal River. He'd been dead since the night before. No drugs or booze, no foul play. No goading from friends. The noose was not elaborate. He'd used his bike to stand on. There was a rambling letter that made no sense. We all knew how he would get ideas in his head but no one could identify any crisis or conflict that would have prompted such a drastic action.

As Mark talked I kept gazing at the way the overhead light hit the clay platter. The shadows of its wavy edges made such an interesting design on the smoky-blue Formica. I tried to stay on that little detail as long as I could. I didn't want to hear the real words Mark was saying: "autopsy," "service," "eulogy."

In the years since that phone call, especially since Katrina I have, sadly, accumulated enough personal experience that I can now somewhat parse out suicides. The dictionary calls it "a voluntary and intentional act of taking one's own life." The trick to living with the memory of someone who killed him- or herself is to figure out how the act wasn't voluntary or intentional. (There is one exception: When I get old and sick and have no children to care for my decrepit body, I want to turn my dogs over to a trusted caretaker, turn up some beautiful music, and send myself to sleep forever, just like Maude in *Harold and Maude*.)

The majority of suicides I know should really be classified as death from depression. A couple of others, I believe, truly didn't think that their actions would result in death. There is one person among this sad cohort who I think really did intend to die, and knew what he was doing, and I remain very angry at him.

And then there's Andy.

As Mark and I talked that night, and the light shone down on the counter, I couldn't comprehend. Why? What the hell went wrong? Maybe if I'd stayed in Carbondale he'd still be alive. Maybe this, maybe that. I may be flattering myself to think that I played such an important role in his life, but on the other hand, I'd had no idea that he'd even remembered that two-sentence fireside conversation back in Minnesota. Why did he go *there*? Why didn't I make sure he had all my phone numbers in New Orleans? Why didn't I call more to check on him? Why didn't I value myself enough to think that my leaving might be unsettling to him? Why, on the other hand, did I place myself as so damn important, make it all about me? We'd already grown apart in the most natural of ways; he'd fledged and left the nest. Still, he had that latent tendency towards the random, mis-placed dramatic gesture. Some things are harder to get under control than others. Why?

I didn't have to look much further for the answer than Andy's mother's gloating voice when I called her after Mark phoned me. "Didn't I *tell* you he was damaged?" she spat.

I know how much Andy struggled to make the right choices, and how terrible he felt when he made wrong ones. Suicide was a bad choice.

But I think now, with so many years gone by, that I understand his actions a little more. He didn't have depression. As with all nineteen-year-olds, he had bouts of dumb-ass-ness. For one stupid moment, hanging himself from a tree seemed like the right thing to do, an act that, five minutes later, he would think absurd.

Is a predilection towards the dramatic gesture a fault? How would our collective global village have fared without those individual gestures – sometimes monumentally futile – for the sake of a vision that we could not see at the time? On the other hand, who protects the fledglings from themselves? They have to learn to fly, but at what loss?



And that's the nut of it. What bedrock carries a child through those inevitable dumb-ass moments on the journey to the adult side? Our Brigadoon village understood the collective responsibilities of child-raising. Andy was one of ours, and we did our best to bring him up. But when that inevitable dumb-ass moment comes along, what is the prevailing influence? How can the best of collective villages convince an individual Andy that he's not damaged goods?

Since Andy died, Anne-Marie earned a master's degree in social work and has dedicated her career to helping kids with challenges. She created the Carbondale Youth Radio Foundation in Andy's honor, with an annual scholarship for a talented high school student. When we talk, she wants to talk about him, to keep him alive through our conversations. She can rationalize his actions with professional skill, but his death haunts her. She wonders, like me, if somehow she could have prevented it.

Last April I went back to the valley for KDNK's twenty-fifth birthday celebration. Julie came from Oregon. We both arrived on the heels of a substantial snowstorm, and stayed in Aspen that first night and drove together the next morning down to Carbondale. As we made the forty-minute trek Mount Sopris kept us company, gleaming white in the azure sky. It was the first time we'd been together on our old stamping grounds since Andy died, and we tacitly knew that we needed to dissect the unspeakable, to come to some conclusion while we were together in the town that cradled all of us as we grew up in our various ways.

Julie brought up the time Andy had, on a whim, emptied his entire savings account to send away for a commemorative piece of the Berlin Wall. I think he was motivated by a combination of late-night TV advertising enthusiasm and Reagan-era patriotism, but the reality was that he needed that money for clothes and food. We got wind of the caper and held him on the

hot seat until he reluctantly gave up the whole story. As Julie recalled it the scene came back to me: Andy in the office doorway, Julie at her desk speaking carefully, blonde curls shaking, trying to respect Andy's individuality and good intentions yet clearly wanting to smack him for his sheer bone-headedness. We finally negotiated a solution so that, without losing face, he could cancel the order; the official teaching moment was showing him how to negotiate a refund.

A dozen years later we laughed at that memory, but wryly. That had been one of those Andy-raising moments that forced us into deciding what we thought was right and wrong while being able to articulate our rationale to a teenager. "It was such a stupid-ass Andy thing to do," Julie said.

"And that's just what he did when he killed himself," she said. "It was a typical stupid-ass Andy thing to do, and I understand that part of him. But I'm mad as hell at him for it."

Julie was right. I'm mad at him too, but we both understand that hidden little piece of him – in each of us – that would accept that there was a momentary dramatic gesture unfettered by anchoring values. We both wish we could rewind the tape and splice in the part where we grab him by the scruff of the neck and tell him to not act like a stupid shit, and hear him say that rueful, "Yeah, you're right." But we also understand that flash of stupidity – was it everyday adolescence or something more? Does it matter? It was such a tiny piece of the Andy we knew, loved, and respected, yet it was a piece so small and so deadly. Every one of us has those pieces. Does that make us all damaged?

At the anniversary party there were pictures of Andy, blown up and mounted on foam core. There was a black and white shot when he was maybe thirteen, leaning back in the DJ's chair next to the console, headphones on, laughing, freckles sprinkled across his nose like snow-

flakes. I remembered taking that picture, the pleading with him for “just one more,” but I can’t remember the reason.

We ate hors d’oeuvres on little paper plates. Anne-Marie, Mark, Julie and I talked determinedly about the good that’s come out of the Youth Radio program. On the other side of the room the lithe Megan hung with her friends, distancing herself from her parents.

If I have learned anything from knowing Andy it is that I will make my own emotional choices. I will choose Andy’s place in my heart, and it is not a two-dimensional black and white image on foam core. I choose to refuse to allow my darkest imagination to review his moment of death, flailing, bike on the ground too far below, desperately thinking “Oh shit!”

I choose to remember Andy’s hands, and how he taught himself to control them.

I choose to remember his expression as we started gliding upriver in the canoe. I didn’t realize how scared he was, how he’d been holding his breath in fear. To me, being on that water *is* breathing. He was in the bow, I in the stern, paddling. The silver Alumacraft sliced silently through the blue water, green wooded valley rising above us. He turned, constrained by the orange life preserver and not sure where his center of balance was, despite his snowboarding skills. He needed to catch my eye, and as soon as he did, his face melted. It wasn’t a smile, it was a relaxation, a realization. It wasn’t just okay to be in a boat, it was *cool*.

What would have happened had he had that moment when he was fourteen months old instead of fourteen? Would it have made a difference when he had that fatal bout of dumb-ass?

In my memory Andy is three-dimensional, always in musical motion. He is russet and blue, shimmering water and aspen leaves. In my memory, I am leaving the Dinkel Building after a long day at the station. The fall colors are at their peak, and the mountains surrounding Carbondale are splashed with gold and red. Sopris, dusted with an early snow, stands guard, reflect-

ing the pink sunset. The glass door swings shut behind me and I step onto the sidewalk. Before crossing the street to my car I look left. There's the vet's office, and the Pour House and the Rebekah Lodge, the barber shop and Hair Trix ("your vital information exchange"). To the right there's a crowd in Pepino's. Outside our building Bob is changing the sign to announce the next movie and Danilla waves as she locks up her flower shop.

I hear a whizzing out of the gathering dark, and Andy flashes by me. His hair catches the last glint of sunlight, a copper flash, a momentary flame in the dusk. The air is cool and fresh.

I will remember him red-gold, happy, in motion, throwing me a little wave over his shoulder as he speeds down Main Street into the night, safe in the shadow of Mount Sopris.

## Tread Lightly

The sound of the upper cabin screen door opening for the first time after a long absence is distinct; there's a click, a catch, and a little stick as the wooden frame separates from the jamb. It's an emotional sound, signifying the beginning of something. It's a sound of far-away childhood summers and future possibilities. Wherever I am I play it on my internal speakers when I need a lullaby and a cool leafy dream of a safe place on solid ground.

Yesterday began in New Orleans, steamy, clogged with heat-thickened traffic, broken elevators, and Sisyphean workloads. Every human, every vehicle moved as if they were under water. Afternoon minutes melted together as I crawled to the airport, drained and empty. If I didn't get to that Northwest nonstop to Minneapolis I would perish, a roadside cripple devoid of spiritual and emotional fuel. I made the plane at the very last minute.

Two hours later I offered up the prayer of the arrived traveler as the jet wheels touched my native Minnesota soil, dirt once churned deep by ancient glaciers. I trammed it to the Emerald Aisle and by 8:30 was spinning northward on I-35E, happy to be accompanied by a slow-moving sunset saturating the sky with flame and color.

Suburbs melted into open farmland and lights grew farther apart. Interstate to state highway to county road, the world grew more rural as I made the final jog eastward to the edge of the state, where the deep, wide valley of the St. Croix River separates Minnesota from the far Wisconsin hills. A series of smaller roads took me down into the river valley. My rental's wheels crunched on gravel and elation bubbled up inside me as I made the final right turn into

the dense woods, onto the dirt track we call a driveway that drops sharply down towards the river.

That's how I go to my church, and this was an important pilgrimage and I a doubting Thomas.

At 9:30 p.m. twilight still glowed in the late August sky, but it was pitch dark under the forest canopy when I parked the car. The river glimmered below me through the woods, illuminated by a busy full moon, but the cabin was merely a dark shape silhouetted against the water. I made my way down the familiar rocky path, straining to see what looked different. The twelve-foot square wooden landing glowed slightly, and I realized it wasn't the moonlight as much as it was the reflectance of brand new lumber. I couldn't let myself get too excited, but when I stepped onto the landing from the path and didn't crash through the boards I had to start believing. I needed to shed some light on the subject, as they say, so I set down my bag and pulled the key out of my pocket.

I slowed myself down to listen to the opening door. Isn't this silly, I teased myself, getting so worked up over a little sound? But it's a big song to my soul, and when I pulled open the screen door, as always, that little "click" ignited in me the sort of quiet rapture that comes with being in a happy, holy, completely familiar place.

Ah, but rapture is transitory: the noise spooked a Great Blue Heron fishing down along the river. He left loudly, complaining of the interruption with a strident "Crawwwk."

No fumbling necessary; muscle memory guided the key into the lock and I shouldered the heavier, solid inner door open into hallway of the upper building, the first of three simple structures collectively known as our family's cabin. I felt along the wall for the light switch and

threw the landing behind me into brightness, sudden against the forested dark. I turned to get a real look at the new baby.

Okay, it wasn't really a baby. But for all the labor in its coming it might as well have been. It certainly was a miracle. In the month since I'd last been there, a team of carpenters had come and gone, cleaning up after themselves so tidily that for a nanosecond I wondered if they'd been there at all, and if I'd just imagined my dad's phone call two weeks ago.

I looked first at the landing I'd just walked onto. The moss-chewed, rotten boards I'd hated for so many years had been replaced by twelve new solid two-by-sixes. I made a slow turn, taking it all in, and headed for the stairs that lead farther down the hill to the lower cabins and the water.

I've never really thought of lumber as a turn-on, but what I saw put me into a sort of ecstasy amid the dark forest primeval. I took a step, and another. Solid. I set my foot down, hard. No shimmying, nothing gave way. I stopped and breathed slowly, a heady perfume of leaf mold and fresh sawdust. Then, like a geeky kid in a sack race, I jumped up and down and laughed out loud into the wilderness at my own bad pun: stair-a firma.

My cabin, built by my father in 1962, perches on the wooded hillside overlooking the St. Croix River, the border between Minnesota and Wisconsin. In 1967 Congress, in one of its few acts of wisdom (led by Fritz Mondale and Gaylord Nelson) established the entire St. Croix watershed as the nation's first federally managed Scenic and Protected Waterway. Any human element (dam, gravel pit, summer home) already in existence was grandfathered in, but no new construction has been allowed in the valley or up above it for over forty years. Thus, the place that has always been most important to me has remained exactly the same since I was eight.

I call it National Park Lite. Once remote, the river is now dangerously within commuter range of the Twin Cities, yet it maintains its wilderness feel: on weekdays I see only a handful of fishermen if I see anyone at all. There's an osprey nest just upriver, and bald eagles troll from the sky. In the long summer dusk owls call back and forth across the water and beavers work the shoreline. Fireflies glimmer in the forest. At night the stars are thick, and sometimes the Northern Lights shimmer up and down the water. I burn a lot of candles, preferring to keep a low lumen profile to blend in with the woods and remain unseen from the river.

The architect was drawing under the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright. It is built simply, yet innovatively in what was typical architectural experimentation of that era. The idea was to break down boundaries between man and nature while maximizing the river views from the narrow lot. The result is three separate buildings running up the hill from the river, connected by an outside staircase and connecting the humans with the forest and water.

If you were to build an architect's model you'd use two whole brown shoeboxes and one cut in half, surfaced with inexpensive, grooved plywood. The unit closest to the river is one of the big shoeboxes, set parallel to the water. This is the main cabin, and although it has a bathroom and a pantry, it's mostly a kitchen and large living space anchored at one end by a massive native sandstone fireplace and at the other by a friendly deck with (so cool in 1963) a tree growing through it. The entire wall facing the river and several other panels are made only of window screens, and the view extends through the riparian trees up and down the river.

Leaving the main cabin, one heads up one flight of stairs to a small landing, off which is the middle unit, a twelve-foot by twelve-foot single room just big enough to hold two twin beds, two dressers, one rocking chair, and a pair of unruly older brothers. Like the other units, two of the four sides of this little box room are made of window screens.



The upper cabin likewise is connected by a stringer of stairs ending at the top landing, where I stood in such happy awe last night. This is the second long shoebox: it houses a full bathroom (shower, no tub), two small bedrooms, and at the end, a modest master bedroom with the trademark floor-to-ceiling screens on two sides and a double bed boasting what I regard as the world's oldest, moldiest, and most comfortable mattress.

The cabin is a one-season affair with no insulation and not enough solid walls to keep out the cold. Where there are screens instead of windows, we are protected from the weather only by heavy canvas blinds that must be rolled down and grommeted tight against the window frames. Even with the fire blazing, it can get deep-bone cold there along the water.

It is a tree house, a set of open spaces designed to place the dweller in nature while enjoying the comforts of modern life. Thus, we have a dishwasher and a lovely hot shower, and yet I can lie in bed this morning and watch a pileated woodpecker rip apart a dead tree eight feet away from my pillow. I can loll naked in a hammock by the river's edge, hidden from view of any other humans, in a state of grace, emotional peace, and eroticism, feeling like a complete human being, even though tourists are canoeing on the water just a few feet away. As chickadees burble and the afternoon grows drowsy, or as a thunderstorm booms up and down the valley, my spirit is filled up, my soul regains its balance, and I connect with the force that is God. It is a holy place.

No heaven without a hell, however, and the bane of the cabin's design is its connective tissue: the wooden stairs that tie the three units together. They are outside. This means one has to go outside and up or down two flights of steps to, say, brush your teeth, get a glass of milk, or answer the phone. In the daytime when the weather's fine this is not too much of a big deal, but on a cold night or in the rain it becomes a journey. The stairs are not well-lit under the best of

circumstances and the lights are wired in such a way that you can't turn on the downstairs section from the upstairs or vice versa. Therefore, nocturnal stair travel requires a flashlight or extremely confident knowledge of the layout. But that act of going outside is important; it keeps one involved in nature (and an expert at raincoat and flashlight logistics).

When I was small I slept in the upper cabin and rarely had a need to go downstairs at night. In my teens, with my brothers long grown, I found adolescent independence by moving into the middle cabin. Boys can pee over the edge of the landing, but girls must learn to negotiate the stairs in the pitch dark. Seventeen treads from the middle landing to the top or sixteen from middle to bottom. Fortunately, each tread has unique squeaks to help with placement as one moves down or up. I remember frigid late-August nights snuggled toasty under two or three woolen Hudson's Bay blankets, feeling the urge growing every minute, finally forced into the freezing air and wet night to make the stair trek to the bathroom. Life lesson learned: the thing you want to do the least is the thing you have to do the most. I also learned that it's important to feel for acorns before planting full weight on a stair; failure to do so can result in surprise foot piercings, and stigmata are so out of fashion.

Now, as an adult with a bad memory, I sleep in the master bedroom and live in the main cabin. Thus I seem to spend half my night running up and down both flights of stairs to retrieve my book, refill my drink, or locate my sweatshirt. Often I do not practice good flashlight management and end up with all my illuminators at the wrong end of the stairs.

The original stairs rotted away when I was in high school, a time when my father and stepmother had two small, tumbly little girls and a perfect crusty WASP lifestyle. When the stairs were replaced, Dad optimistically instructed the carpenters to pile the old wood under the cabins; he'd pull the nails and burn the lumber in the fireplace. He didn't care that it was chemi-

cally treated (although not nearly as much so as lumber is now) and unsafe to burn; he's a thrifty German and that's good wood, dammit.

A colleague of my father's once said that if you ordered a judge from L. L. Bean you'd get Bob Bowen, an apt summary that omits only a tendency for bad puns. The cabin was his fishing haven, an oasis of coolness and green far away from the hot, dusty job of downtown lawyering. My earliest memories are of golden evenings, hearing his old brown Mercedes crunch down the long driveway, and a "Halloo" from the top landing before he headed to his room to shed his city skin of blue button-down and Rooster tie. After a long few minutes we'd feel his tread on the stairs—the downstairs cabin jiggled slightly—the door would open, and I'd run for the hug and the close, faint smell of Old Spice and pipe tobacco.

After dinner, martini in one hand and rod in the other, Dad headed either for the shoreline or the boat, depending on weather, water level, and angler's whim. Sometimes he pulled out an extra rod and brought along my brother Jim; sometimes I went with him, carrying a much safer, less tangle-able library book.

Northern summer twilights last past ten, giving us long evenings on the river. Dad casted, I read. We poked around, too, nosing the boat through the chain of marshy, grassy sloughs and islands that run along the Wisconsin side. We saw deer picking through the woods and, once or twice, the then-endangered beaver. (There's an irony there, given the present rate of beaver destruction, but I digress.) We'd marvel together at the wild creatures and the beauty of the water and sky as bats and swallows danced above us.

As darkness came around and the last few bits of ice swirled at the bottom of Dad's empty glass, he'd point the boat home to the warm lights shining behind the leaves, the smell of wood smoke, and quiet family chatter.

When I was eight or nine, Dad sat me down on the couch by the fireplace and taught me to play cribbage, forcing me to learn the basic math skills I'd missed when I skipped first grade due to my "exceptional reading ability." Cribbage became a connector, a space where we had something safe to do with our hands and enough open minutes to broach—and think about, and reply to—dangerous subjects. It remains a bridge between father and daughter, even on the darkest, rainiest nights. Lots of business got done playing the best two out of three games.

My dad taught me to treasure the cabin. It was where he and I began to understand each other and build our mutual, deeply rooted love of the water, the trees, and the land itself. The Eagle Scout taught his daughter the difference between ash and maple; how to cut and stack firewood; and the timetable for the blooming of spring wildflowers (first Bloodroot, then Wild Anemone and tiny little violets, then, at the end of April, the Jack-in-the-Pulpit and Lady's Slipper). He showed me where to find chanterelle mushrooms, and how to tie a solid half-hitch, and how to mix the right combination of oil and gas for the boat motor.

After my parents divorced, the cabin became a haven for Dad. He re-married—my stepmother's family home is just downriver—and they had two daughters who grew up, like me, as river babies. I finished high school and went off to college in Iowa, and my cabin time shortened to a weekend here and there.

During my sophomore year, my eldest half-sister was diagnosed with leukemia. She died the next summer after a hard, painful fight that tore out all our hearts, especially her mother's. The association with the cabin was strong, and unable to bear the grief of memory, or think of her red-gold curls in the dappled sunlight, my parents deserted the place. They shunned the river, staying instead at my stepmother's parents' estate a half a mile up the road. No more evening

fishing for Dad. No more fireside cribbage. The lumber piles lay dormant, enthusiasm to pull nails from that good wood gone.

The place fell into disrepair. Mouse turds covered the kitchen counters. I moved even farther away and didn't pay enough attention.

In the early nineties Dad started the "Last Will and Testament" talk, prompted by a brush with prostate cancer. Who wanted the cabin? Sensibly, my siblings declined. I, of course, stood up and waved my hand crying "Pick me! Pick *me!!!*" Dad was tickled. Over the intervening years we talked more about it, and how it would work practically and financially. I began to go there more, and began to take proprietary notice of the condition of the place. It was terrible.

Then there came a time when I was self-employed, and was able to spend a large chunk of summer at the river. The first year was very challenging. I drove up with my dogs (just a twenty-two hour hop from New Orleans) and settled in with vigor and a bad attitude about the way I felt the place had been let go. I threw away piles of *New Yorkers* from the Reagan years, dust and mouse shit from who cares when. It took two days to clean the lime and corrosion from my grandmother's teakettle. The lumber piles were extremely dangerous. At any minute I expected a dog would put out an eye on a nail while enthusiastically, blindly chasing a chipmunk. I lost ten pounds from running up and down the stairs. Spa St. Croix, I call it. But running up and down the stairs began to feel like an iffy project at best; treads were rotting and the staircases wobbled like Jell-O. A safety railing gave way when I leaned against it.

It was awkward because I lived there, and would eventually have ownership, but I did not own it. My stepmother got all protective and felt the need to run around and pee on all the family property bushes. She'd say things like "Your father isn't dead yet and it's not yours!" and have Dad check my trash to make sure I wasn't throwing out anything *important*. This created a

rift between us, and put my father in a very uncomfortable position. It made it difficult for me to get him to approve changes, lest she be upset.

I worked through mighty anger as I scrubbed, scraped, hauled, and hacked. How could they let this place go? What was up with that attitude?

But cleaning was healthy activity; the river a soothing presence. It always flows. Different water moves past all the time. I could jump in when I got hot or tired. Every morning, I went down to the water and swam out to the middle of the river; baptized by the cold cleansing water each time I dove underneath the surface.

Eventually I realized that the housecleaning went deeper than dust and old newspapers. One night, as stars filled the sky, I sat on the beach at three in the morning, meditating on the beauty of the landscape and the power of that wild, familiar place. I thought about the silverware drawer packed with mouse droppings, the overgrown property, the uncared-for rooms. I thought of children that I will never have, the child my father lost, and my siblings' children who represent the future of my DNA. I asked myself who I would leave the cabin to, and I didn't know the answer. I wanted to talk about it with Dad over a cribbage game.

As the moon rippled silver on the water, I let the anger go. I felt clean inside. I am the next generation, I thought. I am the link in the chain. It is my time now to give energy, to clean, to care, to fill the home with love, and to honor my history and my future.

Not long after that night my stepmother and I called an unspoken truce. Dad and I began working out a transitional management system: he retains ownership; I am the steward. He pays for repairs, I do the work. So far, so good. In the several summers since, we've made lots of improvements.

Last year, in an impromptu dinner-table ceremony attended by me, my step-mom, and two wonderful friends, Dad toasted the cabin and me, and unofficially handed it over. I spent most of that evening trying to serve an elegant dinner to five guests while emptying tannin-colored rainwater from overflowing buckets and pans, thanks to a suddenly, radically failing roof. Dad made his speech while rain beat down on us, literally, drops plunking into the salad while I handed out more towels. “It’s all yours now, kid!” he said, graciously waving at the puddle-covered floor and array of kitchenware set out to catch the streams of rain.

A leaking roof is a non-negotiable fact. It has to be fixed immediately. The stairs were aging, however, and their replacement was a subjective issue. Dad insisted they were fine. I saw them as increasingly unsafe, rotting away under thick layers of green moss. The contractor ran his screwdriver tip along the railing and it crumbled away, and he, too began lobbying Dad to initiate a replacement. I persuaded some friends to haul away the old broken deep freezer from the pantry, and I watched the stairs shimmy and bend underneath their weight, petrified that all would collapse in one, big mess of liability lawsuit. The stairs held – barely.

Some time ago Dad’s right leg began to grow numb, a byproduct of a degenerating back. His unreliable leg now gives way randomly, and when it does, he crumples to the ground. Sometimes he picks himself up and continues on his way; other times he suffers injury. The trek down the rocky path and the negotiating of the rickety stairs became more difficult for him. He came to the cabin far less often.

I, too, began moving with fear. Going between cabins in the dark, I started mentally marking the treads not as numbers or squeaks, but as soft or hard, rotten or safe. Dad insisted that the stringers were solid; we spent a couple of afternoons each summer replacing the worst of

the treads. “Bonding time,” he called it as we hammered and slapped at mosquitoes. “Bullshit,” I called it. “A waste of time.” In addition to basic safety, I couldn’t believe that Hizzoner the Corporate Trial Attorney didn’t see the liability danger. A couple of summers ago the upper stairs began listing to the north, the angle becoming alarmingly pronounced. Each step produced a wild shimmying. During one of his rare visits, even my mild-mannered husband took up the cause, pointing out the engineering failures in *mano-y-mano* sessions with his father-in-law. No go. I couldn’t let my arthritic mother visit. I couldn’t let cash-poor friends have the place for the weekend. Hauling groceries or a dash downstairs to lower the blinds against a dawn downpour became potentially deadly.

Cribbage couldn’t bridge the issue. My father is so stubbornly German sometimes, so thrifty a Depression baby, that he couldn’t see the safety issue. I worked him from every angle during every game, finally pushing him to the point where he refused to consider it any more. I called “last card” and let it be.

In mid-May of this year my husband and I experienced a marvelous alignment of vacation days and immediately flew up to the cabin. We hauled our luggage and groceries happily down the hill, and paused for the magic sound as I pulled the top cabin screen door back. We turned to go downstairs and were alarmed; winter had not been kind to our stairs. They listed badly. Camile went underneath to inspect the damage to the top section. He called me over for an up-close view of the spot where the landing had pulled completely away from the stringers. As I moved towards him, the seemingly sound plank underneath me gave way and my leg shot through the deck. My knee took the damage; a few inconsequential drops of blood hid serious internal bruising and something nasty to the cartilage. The next day, when he made it down the hill for an inspection, Dad uttered a completely typical, insensitive “joking” comment: “Those



stairs are fine. You wouldn't have gone through if you hadn't gotten so fat." This is far too sensitive an area with me to be joked about by anyone, and was a completely unfair hit. I immediately excused myself and fled upstairs (carefully) to cry. Camile said he saw instant remorse in Dad's eyes. It was no longer about the persona of stubbornness or the moral righteousness of the newly-anointed. We had tread too heavily on each other's feelings and forgotten to focus on essential stewardship.

That night Dad called to say he'd talked to the contractor and new stairs would be installed pronto. I felt like the river with a south wind; the current running strong below while the wind pushes the surface water back upstream. I was furious at my father for his gross insensitivity, and furious at myself for not being more forgiving and understanding about his habits and my expectations, and dismayed at the thought that some factor other than sensibility prompted the decision to spend many thousands of dollars on new stairs. I knew our hurt feelings would dissipate over time. It was just his way of reacting to the situation, I told myself. Let it go.

But new stairs were not yet to be. A few weeks after the rotten board incident a storm blew a pine tree onto my stepmother's house down the road, and the contractor had to turn his attention to securing that home and getting a new roof on it. It was an all-summer project. No new stairs this year, I thought. I practiced giving it up. I spent ten days at the cabin in the middle of July, and tiptoed around the holes and the soft spots. Dad came down only once, and it was hard for him in all ways. It was hard for me, too. I knew we'd make peace eventually, but he'd hit a raw nerve and knew it, and I'd reacted badly and knew it, too. We were awkward around each other. We talked about politics and avoided personal topics. We didn't play cribbage.

I planned to return to the cabin for an extended Labor Day weekend. A couple of weeks ago I checked in with Dad as I drove through Uptown New Orleans, chatting about this and that in anticipation of the trip. I was negotiating traffic and listening with only about a quarter of my brain, and thus, I missed it when he mentioned, with a cross-examiner's deliberate casualness, "Oh, by the way, your stairs are done." I blew right past it, blathering on until my subconscious finally got the news: "*What????*" I hollered, "*Stairs???*" He reprimanded me for driving while using a cell phone, of course, and not paying attention. He then explained that, since the insurance claim was still pending on my stepmother's house, the contractor filled the lull by tackling the stair project. As I exclaimed and thanked, he threw in the ringer: "Oh, and also by the way, daughter, they hauled away all that old wood from underneath." No more lumber pile? I couldn't picture it, but I wanted to drive to the airport that minute and go see for myself.

Last night as the plane crossed the Minnesota River on final approach I thought about connections, about bridges, and about the things that bring and keep us together. The thought hung around as I drove up I-35, and as I followed the path down to the cabin. It was still there when I stepped on solid treads, on solid ground, and as I opened up the top cabin door, spooking the heron. Thus, when I walked to the edge of the top landing and looked down for the first time at our – my - smashing new stairs, it was so much more than new lumber.

But such lumber! The contractor did fabulous work. The main visual difference is that the spindles are much closer together, a design response to updated building codes. They don't look crowded, though; their smooth lines mimic and complement the Prairie Style feeling. The golden wood will age to tawny, then brown. The stringers are double hung, held together solidly with large shiny silver bolts. Each tread is a little Persian rug unto itself, individually designed

and so heavily treated with chemicals that it's guaranteed to survive at least forty Minnesota winters or our money back. I'll be eighty-something then and won't care. The handrails are sanded down, smoothed on the corners and splinter-free for anyone needing guidance en route to the bathroom in the middle of the night. No rotten boards, no perilous holes, just solid, dark honey-colored wood, beautifully put together.

I took my first step down, and felt connected solidly to the lower two cabins, to the earth, to the water, my father, and the greater spirits. I silently thanked my dad for his gifts. I felt him as part of me, connected with DNA and a love of the Great Blue Heron and the ecstasy produced by the clicky sound of the upper cabin screen door when it opens.

And then exuberance took over, and I jumped up and down on each stair, shouting out loud "Yes Yes!!" to the moon and the stars with no consideration for the heron. I reached the middle landing and tested the place where I'd gone through earlier in the spring. Solid as the earth, my love for my father and that land. I turned back and looked uphill, peering to see underneath the upper cabin. I saw nothing but empty space and two ladders, neatly stowed. Clean, empty space. Nobody was going to lose an eye or puncture a foot on a nail sticking out of a board. Stair-a firma, indeed, I thought, as the scent of freshly-cut lumber floated past on a memory.

Side II

## Kings of the Road

In the touring rock and roll world, there are stars and there are stripes. Stars are the people who think they are. Stripes are the people who get them there.

My husband is the lead guitarist for the Radiators, a New Orleans rock and blues band that, after thirty-one years with the same members, is almost always referred to in the press with the words “venerable” or “enduring” attached. (Thank heaven we haven’t seen “grizzled” or “road-weary” yet.) They spend about two hundred nights of each year playing at clubs and theatres around the country. The band has never had a big hit, and aren’t on talent buyers’ A-lists when booking Super Bowl half-time shows or Inaugural Balls. Nonetheless, they are stars in the sense that, as my fellow band-wife Jessica Jones notes, hundreds or even thousands of people stand up and applaud them simply because they show up at the office.

But no one claps for the hard-working stripes, the people who are at the club long before the band shows up, and long after. Stripes include the club staff: the bartenders and bar backs, and waitresses who can, astonishingly, wade through jammed, throbbing mosh pits while holding fully-laden drink trays high above their heads and *not spill a drop*. In high heels. Stripes are the light crew, the money takers at the door, and the house managers. Their work is physically demanding and usually pays badly.

For me, if the venue is my living room, the stripes are the friends crashed on the couch. They are family, the people who take care of me, who get my jokes, and whom I look forward to seeing when I walk into a club, full of anticipation at the night’s potential pleasure. It’s like walking into Cheers. There are so many faces I look forward to seeing: Tad, the fine monitor mixer at the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, Big Drew from Stephen Talkhouse

who sometimes mixes sound for the Subdudes, Wingnut the Caterer, and Friendly Fred the Bus Driver, whose late dog Bud went with him on every tour.

Of all the stripes, though, roadies rule my heart. They are the guys who literally keep the show on the road. For the most part, roadies are smart, funny, creative problem solvers, and dedicated to the cause.

I would guess that a large number of musical performers serve as their own roadies, schlepping their instruments and sound equipment from show to show without anyone to help. I'm not talking Shania Twain-level; I'm talking about the thousands of blues guys, jazz combos, folk singer-songwriters and up-and-coming neo-post-classical-punk-ska college acts performing soon in a bar in your town. They haul their own gear with them, load it into the club, set it up, and pack it all back up again at the end of the night. If they break a string on stage they have a backup guitar, are good enough to play with five strings instead of six, or have amazing stage patter skills and can re-string while they keep the show going. (Chicago folksinger Steve Goodman wrote a witty bit called the Broken String Song just for such emergencies.)

If a band wants to make money they have to sell records or play gigs, or both. (The rock and roll version of hitting the lottery is to have a song included in a film score or used in a television commercial or soundtrack.) Going out on the road to new audiences and additional revenue possibilities is eventually necessary if the band wants to eat.

However, you can't just throw a guitar in a suitcase: every item needs to be packed with sufficient protection to withstand the rigors of travel. Guitars and drums are delicate. Every drum and cymbal rests on a stand, as do microphones, and all those instruments and stands and amplifiers and microphones have to be individually stowed in foam nests within hard-shell cases. Thus, equipment is complicated to load and unload, and it takes up a lot of space. There comes a

tipping point when the touring schedule and equipment load become heavy enough that help is needed to get the gear from gig to gig and get it set up.

The Rads schlepped their own gear for years in and around New Orleans in an ancient Chevy Suburban known as the Bwana Wagon, but as they started to venture out farther to points Houston or Chicago it became evident that they needed additional muscle and square footage.

The band's first roadie was a guy named Coyote who lived at the Dream Palace, the Frenchmen Street watering hole legendary as the site of debauched revels and of a magnificent ceiling mural representing the celestial heavens. In exchange for lodging Coyote tended bar and helped bands with their equipment. When the Rads went on the road, the last item loaded into the van was Coyote, who simply made a space for himself amidst the amplifiers and guitar cases and went to sleep until they got to where they needed to be.

Another early roadie was Eric Smith; in fact, Eric was the first person associated with the band that I ever met. They were playing an acoustic gig in St. Paul and I wanted to get some pictures of Ed Volker playing the club's ratty old upright piano. I asked the guy with the blond mop of curls who was working for the band if it was okay if I went somewhere I wasn't supposed to be. He took the time to read me carefully, then said, "Okay. But don't get in anybody's way."

Eric—indeed, many of the stripes I know—could get day jobs as psychologists, or perhaps as United Nations negotiators. Anyone working barroom or backstage security has to be able to read faces and situations, know the laws and politics, make decisions as to who to let in, who to keep out, and the difference between the bass player's wife and the bass player's girlfriend.

Eric was a master at negotiating with difficult fans. The Radiators play mostly in clubs where the crowd is jammed up against the stage and there's a lot of opportunity for interaction.

Road crews hate this. Obnoxious drunks are great at knocking into gear, spilling drinks, stealing percussion instruments, and yanking monitor speakers off the stage. Eric could wade into a packed crowd, cull the incoherent troublemaker from the herd, put his arm around him and be best buddies as he escorted the guy into the alley or security's waiting arms.

Eric also had a knack for identifying certain personality types, similar to the bartenders' game of predicting the kind of drink a customer will order. Standing at the side of the stage in a theatre jammed with nine hundred people, Eric pointed to a thinly-clad dancing girl swishing both dark hair and full drink in front of guitarist Dave Malone. "She's a jumper," he forecast with certainty. "She'll be up by the end of the set." Sure enough, a few songs later the girl decided she just had to be *with* the band. Without ropes or pulleys, she levitated vertically onto the stage and grabbed for Dave's microphone. But Eric was ahead of her. He'd gone up the side stairs as she jumped up, met her before she could assault Malone, smiled and joked as he got the elbow lock on and, ever the Southern gentleman, graciously escorted her down the stairs and into the arms of the security goon.

Eric had an extremely long shelf life as roadies go, lasting ten years with the band until he got married and his new wife decided she didn't like him gone so much. He lives in Virginia with his growing family. In a lot of ways we grew up together, and I miss him.

For the first few years, the Radiators mixed all their sound from the stage, that is, while Camile was playing guitar, he was also using equipment at the side of the stage to adjust the sound as heard by the audience and by the band. This is a standard operation for most small club acts, but it's never a happy set-up because you don't know how it sounds in the house and if something goes wrong your choices are to live with it or stop playing long enough to fix it.



As the Rads started playing to larger crowds and more sophisticated gigs, they added Kenny Samuels to the team, first as roadie/sound man and now as Front of House Production Poobah. (A venue has two sides; the front of the house is everything from the lip of the stage forward, including food and beverage, merchandise sales, and, most importantly to Kenny, how the audience sees and hears the show.)

Eric and Kenny spent several years together in the cab of a leased yellow Ryder truck, criss-crossing the country as the band's fame (not fortunes) climbed. They did it all: hauled gear, mixed sound, fixed stuff, procured drugs, and bitched a lot. Roadies are well-honed, prolific bitches. For the best bitching and to learn more than you'll ever want to know about life as a stripe on the road (double entendre intended), read *Road Mangler* by Phil Kaufman or *Roadie* by Karl Kuenning. Kuenning also runs an entertaining website at [www.roadie.net](http://www.roadie.net).

Radiator roadies wear several hats. The first job is to drive the equipment truck from gig to gig. The second is to load and unload (or, ideally, supervise the loading and unloading) at the venue, and to set up and, after the show, break down and repack all the equipment and instruments. The third duty is to work during the concert, attending to said equipment and instruments and to the musicians. Generally, one crew member serves as the guitar tech, which is an art unto itself. This person restrings the guitars before shows and troubleshoots when the electronics go bad, hands the musician the right guitar for each song (a challenge when the set list usually disintegrates after three or four songs), changes broken strings, and replenishes beverages.

Dave plays a lot of guitars and switches them out several times during a show. Camile plays one, maybe two guitars and roadies appreciate that. He doesn't usually break strings during shows, and rarely needs his strings changed. Dave's guitars need re-stringing every couple

of days because his skin reacts with the metal, causing the strings to go flat and corrode. (According to our roadie Phil, this is a common situation.) The second roadie works the opposite side of the stage and is just as busy taking care of Frankie the drummer, Ed and his keyboards, and Reggie the bass player.

This, of course, is an expensive arrangement. When you add salaries for two roadies, Kenny, and a road manager, the Rads carry a heavy payroll load. Not many bands can afford to do that – and when times turn exceptionally lean the band members, as officers of the corporation, have forgone their own salaries to make payroll. (Kids, don't try that at home.) Not many bands are stupid or single-minded enough to tour two hundred nights of the year, either.

Spend two months in a bouncy, uncomfortable truck with a guy you don't like, and aren't liking more every day he doesn't shower, and spend your nights loading equipment in and out of clubs with crappy sound for a cranky musician who hates the way you set up his guitar, and it's raining, and you either go postal or develop a sick, wonderful sense of humor.

A favorite roadie trick is to put a new guy in charge of fixing the “broken” fader marked DDA. They don't tell the kid that DDA means Doesn't Do Anything. The recruit's ensuing struggle to fix the problem while maintaining a cool pose provides a ripe opportunity for riposte and an underlying and very professional opportunity to critically evaluate the struggling newbie's problem-solving skills.

Once, at soundcheck before a show at Stephen Talkhouse on Long Island, Camile teased Big Drew about not having enough microphones on stage. After the band left, Drew went to work with a vengeance, miking everything he could think of and writing in Sharpie along the sidestage ductwork the hit phrase, “He's been microphied!” That throw-down set off a nation-

wide competition to see which crew could best mike Camile's guitar stand, a gag perfected by the monitor crew at Tipitina's. Of course, Camile's guitar stand doesn't make noise and has no need to be miked, but the sound guys will always point out to him that they've got it done while carefully explaining what microphones they're using and why. Camile he always thanks them profusely. Camile gets his guitar stand miked at clubs across the country. This confuses the tech geek enthusiasts in the audience, much to the roadies' delight.

In the early eighties the Rads started touring heavily, and they developed a fairly efficient system to economize on travel costs. The manager and booking agency work together to book a region, say, the West Coast, that starts with the House of Blues-San Diego on a Friday and works up the coast to Los Angeles, Santa Cruz and then the San Francisco area the following weekend. A longer trip out would include the Pacific Northwest, or maybe Vegas or Phoenix. The band flies to the starting city, rents cars, and drives from gig to gig, flying home from the last city.

There has to be distance between shows because promoters usually invoke a "hundred mile clause" in a contract, prohibiting bands from playing within a hundred miles of their venue within a certain period of time. It's fair enough; it ensures that the people putting up the money get exclusive performances in their market. It does force touring acts to travel from city to city every night, and forces long-term bands like the Radiators to seek a balance that both honors market exclusivity and the practicalities of giving the crew enough time to load out, sleep, and drive to the next gig. Too many days off and hotel costs eat up the budget; too few and the roadies get chewed up.

When I tell people what my husband does they invariably ask, "Does he travel on a bus?" Contrary to VH-1 myth, tour busses are not an economic reality for a band like the Rads – in-

deed, like most touring club acts – with no major label or corporate sugar daddy to pay for them. Besides, a tour bus wouldn't hold the band's equipment.

Roadies are on the road a lot more than the musicians. Say our hypothetical West Coast tour ends on a Saturday in Seattle. While the band flies home on Sunday morning, the roadies make the seventeen-hour run to Denver to wait in a cheap motel for the next weekend. The band members see their families, do their laundry, and sleep in their own beds, then fly out the next Thursday for gigs in Boulder, Denver, and maybe a couple of ski areas. Again, at the end of the three- or four-day run, the stars return to New Orleans and home comforts while the roadies haul their tired asses through a Nebraska blizzard, seven more hours of Iowa than they care to see, and finally into Minneapolis on maybe Wednesday. The band flies up on Thursday, they play a private party and two shows at the Cabooze, and on Sunday fly home. The afternoon Northwest nonstop can move a person from Minneapolis to New Orleans in about 130 minutes; for the roadies, it's twenty-two long hours in a bumpy, uncomfortable truck to an apartment they haven't seen in a month.

When our roadies pull in to the next town, they do not loll poolside at the Hilton. They drive directly to the venue and hope for help from the in-house crew to unload the entire twenty-four-foot truck packed with large, very sturdy cases holding amplifiers, monitor speakers, cables, microphones, drum stands, mike stands, compressors, noise gates, equalizers, about fifteen guitars, three or four basses, Frankie's drum set, and two keyboards. All this stuff gets wheeled down out of the truck and into the building. There are often stairs, elevators and awkward hallways. Some gear gets unpacked on the stage; some goes out to the soundboard in the house. The roadies set up the stage, Kenny sets up the house sound, somewhere in there they try to eat,

or find a couch to crash for an hour before the show. Then it's back to work, on stage duty during the show and then the breakdown and load out afterwards.

Load out is always the hardest, because everyone's tired and although the more established places have dedicated crews, sometimes the "help" the promoter is supposed to provide has gotten too drunk or never showed up at all. With luck, someone has ordered food from the kitchen before it closed, or there are sandwiches. As the bar staff closes out the registers, sweep the floors, and throw chairs onto tables, our roadies finally get a minute to sit down and eat, drink a beer, and maybe flirt with a pretty girl. This is when Camile and I usually leave the club, and Jackson Browne's "The Loadout" always comes to mind as we wade ankle deep in beer cups, dodging the woman with the push broom and the blue-bandanna-ed, elaborately tattooed guy pushing a six-foot high crate of gear.

It's a hard life. Burnout is high. Roadies do it for the adventure, for the opportunity to travel to some neat places, to be in the rock and roll world. In some ways it's running away to join the circus. But they all love the music, and that's why they stay. One night Camile and Dave were blazing away in a dueling guitar solo, and our then-roadie Nesto looked at me with a giant grin, pointed to the stage and said, "*That's* why I love my job!!"

For some reason, despite all the idiots and weirdoes circling the band, the Radiators consistently end up with great roadies. In *Roadie*, Kuenning remarks at one point that guys from the military make the shift into roadie life very easily because they understand discipline, working under difficult physical situations, and the importance of being on time. That's why Scotty, one of my all-time favorite roadies, did so well; he is a former Marine, lanky, tightly wound with arms like braided leather. Scotty's favorite T-shirt read "We put the *fun* in dysfunctional!" He was indefatigable. We called him Mr. Peppy. When everyone else was completely whipped, our

Scotty could be found roller-blading around the parking lot or ice dancing outside the Aspen hotel with a local cutie, she in a pink skirt, he in his tattered olive drab duffel coat.

Keyboardist Ed Volker carries half the singing load and needs hot tea and honey on stage at all times. Usually it is up to the promoter to provide this. Ed is unusually finicky about requiring the brand that comes in the bear-shaped containers. Scotty loved that it had to be the little bear. He would get very fierce with uninitiated house managers, lapsing into drill sergeant mode: “The *little bear!*” he’d scream at some poor stage worker. “The honey *has* to be *in* the *little bear!*” Get me a *little bear!*” Of course he always had a little bear of honey hidden in a drawer, just in case.

One Halloween he worked in a full cow costume – horns and all – that looked exactly like a giant puffy Gateway box. I took pride that my husband’s strings got changed by a guitar tech with a prominent pink udder.

A couple of miscellaneous roadie facts:

Roadies make great movers. My brother Jim and I conducted a highly scientific comparison one summer when he and his wife moved from Boulder, Colorado to Santa Fe the same week I moved from Carbondale, Colorado to New Orleans. We had similar amounts of stuff. Jim spent days on the phone negotiating deals with the top-end national moving chains. I used a frequent flyer ticket to bring Jesse Whiteman, the Rads’ drummer’s son and sometimes roadie, up from New Orleans. Jim’s expensive moving crew arrived at his home a day late and took two days to load all his stuff. Jesse directed my labor crew – a bunch of drunks I’d lured from the bar with the promise of free beer – and had my rented U-Haul loaded in three hours. It took a week for my brother’s moving van to get to Santa Fe, and when it did, and was unpacked, they found

every single piece of his wife's extensive Stickley furniture collection destroyed. My truck, driven by Jesse, pulled into my New Orleans driveway about twenty-four hours after leaving Colorado, contents intact.

Another thing: roadie routing beats MapQuest any day. If you need to know how long it takes to get somewhere, ask a roadie and they'll give you an ETA within a fifteen-minute window complete with construction and detour updates. Some years ago, just before my inaugural summer drive between New Orleans and my Minnesota cabin, I casually asked the crew if they liked driving through Iowa when they went to the Twin Cities. Scotty looked at me firmly. "No Iowa," he commanded. He plucked the road atlas from my hand and ran his finger up I-55 through Memphis and into Arkansas, north through Missouri into Illinois, then up through Wisconsin. No Iowa. Takes way too long. He also made me listen to the important stuff: there are no gas stations between Jackson and Memphis, which is just about when your tank gets low, and few motels between Cape Girardeau and St. Louis, which is just about when your personal energy runs low. Illinois has beautiful rest areas. The Wisconsin State Patrol is very serious about that sixty-mile-per-hour speed limit, and if it's sunny they'll use airplanes, but if you get caught they take plastic.

Driving is the longest yet smallest part of the job. A roadie – at least a Rads roadie - is primarily a professional sound reinforcement specialist and instrument technician. Roadies take care of the gear, setting it up so that it works with the club's sound system, while keeping the musical instruments in shape over the long haul. In a five-piece rock band such as the Radiators, they have a lot to manage.

Why is there so much stuff? It starts with the drummers. Drums are noisy, and guitars and other plucked instruments have to fight to be heard. When Les Paul invented the electric guitar, there was a certain amount of glee among string players who could now not only be heard, but thrashed, distorted, wah-wahed and cranked up to eleven.

With amplification came amplifiers, and microphones, electric keyboards and signal processors and mixing boards and monitor speakers and all the rest of it, and now bands are slaves to those very tools that made their sound possible.

If you go to a Rads show, you will see large boxes stacked behind the band (amplifiers), large boxes on each side of the stage (house speakers through which the audience hears the music) and smaller, wedge-shaped boxes in front of the musicians (monitor speakers through which the band hears the music).

On stage, Camile plays a note by striking a string on his malachite-green Paul Reed Smith Custom 24 guitar using a pick carved out of translucent agate. The string vibrates, and a device called a pickup installed on the guitar translates (or picks up) that vibration into an electronic signal. That signal runs from the guitar through a cable to the amplifier behind him, which processes and boosts the signal, but not enough. Thus, although the sound comes out of the front of the amp as a warm, vibrant note, sounding just the way Camile likes it, it's not loud enough to hear. Think of your laptop's built-in speakers compared with using headphones. Additionally, it's so directional that anyone standing in front of Camile who may hear the note won't be able to hear the notes from Ed's piano. Camile can't hear Ed, either. So the little note has to be sent through speakers and mixed with notes from the other guitar, drums, piano, vocals, and bass in a mix that is of equal volume and can be heard evenly by both band and audience.



The way this is done is to place a microphone in front of each amplifier to capture the sound emerging from it. The drums are also miked, and there are dedicated vocal microphones for Ed, Camile, and Dave. Thus, there are at least twenty mikes picking up sound from various parts of the stage. Each mike is attached to a cable, and all the mike cables are run through a snake to the soundboard, located out in the house. There, Kenny plugs the other end of each mike cable into its respective place on the club's mixing board and starts adjusting the sound from each one to get a good mix coming out of the house speakers.

Onstage, since the band is so loud they can't hear each other, they have to have a separate sound system to monitor themselves. So, inside the snake is a gadget called a splitter that duplicates the signal from each mike cable (actually splits it in two) and sends it right back to the side of the stage to the monitor board. A monitor guy mixes the sound much the same as Kenny, only he doesn't do it for the audience speakers, he does it for the band. They hear the music through the wedges on the floor in front of them, and it is usually completely different from what we hear out in the audience. Camile and Ed are on opposite sides of the stage, so through Camile's monitor speaker you'll hear a little Camile, a little Dave, and a lot of Ed's keyboard and vocals.

The club or venue always provides the house and monitor sound systems. The band provides everything else. After unloading the gear, our roadies work with the sound people from the club to set everything up and mesh the systems together.

Of course, there are countless variables and opportunities for error. Hard-working stripes spend a good chunk of their lives contending with small disasters: a hum that won't go away or an amp that keeps blowing tubes. Visiting crews tend to blame the shitty club equipment, while the home-town teams just might possibly think the out-of-towners are a bunch of prima donna

assholes. Similar bad feelings run between non-union and union guys, the sound crew versus the lighting people, and so on.

Sometimes it's no one's fault. All venues have gremlins. Everything's perfect at the end of a late-afternoon soundcheck, and throughout the evening, no one touches anything. There is no opening act. When the Rads step on stage at 10 pm, however, the entire sound system screeches with feedback or perhaps Ed's monitor sound has vanished.

Outdoor gigs are a whole beast unto themselves. Rain and lightening don't mix well with electric guitars, and it's never fun when it snows. One June day our crew was setting up for a groovy private party at a farm west of Minneapolis when the dark clouds overhead sprouted a tornado. The roadies were trying to hold on to the canvas stage covering to keep it from blowing away when weather-savvy locals screamed at them to run for the barn. They did, and thus we ren't crushed when straight-line winds sent the overhead lighting rig crashing onto the stage a minute later.

And then there are the completely unanticipated, goofy trip-ups, my favorite being the New Year's Eve in San Francisco when Ed's electric keyboard shorted out because too much confetti fell into it. That was a gig staged by the legendary Family Dog group, who were supposed to be these really cool hippies but turned out to be self-serving assholes. It was an awkwardly-arranged venue, and the only place I could see Camile was by standing in the wings amidst heavy velvet curtains and directly in our then-tech Mike Fisher's way. I try to be polite when I'm in a band crew's working area. I'm careful not to trip over cables and am sensitive where I set my drink. It's their office space, after all. The Family Dog people had been so nasty all night that I took extra care to make sure it was cool to sit in that little niche. Mike graciously offered me a stool.

So I'm listening, minding my own business when a self-important Family Dog man, apoplectic with rage, bears down on me from out of the darkness. "You!" he shouted, pointing at me. "You!!" He pointed at the stool, so mad he couldn't get the words out. "You-you-you-you're...you're *sitting on something!*" What he meant to say was that he wanted the stool, but we girls know damn well we're sitting on something, and it ain't no chair, know what I mean? Like, was this guy just realizing this? Was he stating the obvious? Was this some sort of odd California mating call? All I could think of was Ruth Brown singing "If I can't sell it, I'm gonna keep on sittin' on it/I ain't gonna give it away." The retorts rushing from my brain all arrived in my mouth at the same time, creating a mute gridlock, and the only response left was to look at Mike and fall off that barstool laughing and give it to the guy. Now, some fifteen years later, Mike and I have a standard greeting that always turns heads: "Hey baby! I hear you're sittin' on something!" He'll yell it across the stage, or from the stage into the audience. For a big birthday he bought me a bar stool with a Harley Davidson flame on the seat so I'll always be hot. That's why I love roadies. They never let me take it sitting down.

Shows like the Family Dog New Year's are an exception, however; most of the time everyone gets along well enough to at least fix the problems and get on with the job. Some go so above and beyond it makes you embarrassed because nothing you ever do as a human being could ever rival that effort. For example, just before a sold-out acoustic show at the Great American Music Hall, Camile's classical guitar developed a mysterious short in the pickup. The stage security guy went back to his house and got his own for Camile to play, taking a cab both ways at his own expense.

For the Radiators the most prestigious gig of the year is to close the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. They've done it for nearly thirty years, and it is a very special day cap-

ping two weeks of non-stop work. One year, though, something went terribly wrong the night before the festival gig. The band had played at The Dock, a frat-boy fighthouse on the lake. Nesto and Jared were our roadies then. As they finished loading out they were set upon by a pack of young toughs looking for conflict. Nesto, a small, wiry peacemaker, tried to calm the situation down and, for his efforts, got the crap beat out of him. Jared got him to the hospital, and we got the news at dawn Sunday. Nesto'd be okay, but was pretty banged up. Camile and Dave were going to be on their own for the biggest show of the year, or so they thought.

Managing equipment at a high-profile, tightly-scheduled festival like Jazzfest demands professional experience and intricate choreography to get the previous act's gear off the stage and the next band's stuff on and set up within a very short time frame. The teams move as tight as Indy 500 pit crews. They also work closely with each other. When the news about Nesto blew across the Fairgrounds that Sunday morning, the brotherhood of the stripes stepped up in solidarity. Every former Rads roadie who wasn't working the festival – and some who were - showed up at our stage to help, which for at least one meant taking a taxi across town and paying admission.

Some half a dozen techs worked that show, including the band's web guy, on vacation from Rhode Island, who spent that afternoon unpacking and packing up the drum set. Just before show time, Nesto appeared, bandaged, arm in a sling, eye swollen shut. He'd checked himself out of Charity, and rallied the stage troops with his presence and his simple statement: "What, you think I'd miss the most important show of the year?"

A parenthetical observation: The Rads closed out last year's Jazzfest after a set by Jack Stripe of the White Stripes. That star made his stripes – maybe ten thin young men - wear *uniforms* of viper-style black suits, gray shirts, black ties, and fedoras to schlep a truckload of over-

kill equipment and, yes, home furnishings, in May, in New Orleans, with the mercury at ninety and the humidity not far behind. The local stage crew gossiped mightily, empathetic up to a point.

Bands share dressing-room trailers at festivals; protocol dictates that the earlier performers cede trailer space to the ensuing act at a reasonable time after their set, and later players don't expect access until that time. Ah, but Jack Stripe didn't want to share because he had to *decorate* his trailer - Flavor of the Month types always think that ambience and attitude can compensate for lack of talent. We were there to watch an earlier act and were appalled to see his already-exhausted, sweating but sharply-attired crew haul in carpets and lamps. Floor lamps. For a seventy-five minute afternoon festival set. Talk about Rooms to Go.

And the star? Emerges pre-show to greet his adoring fans wearing – get this – the rattiest jeans this side of a Frenchmen Street gutter punk and a designer-stained, torn white T-shirt. His set was over at 4:45, but at 8:30 pm, as the sunset faded and our own roadies were pulling out, those poor zoot-suited kids remained, waiting for the star to emerge from his *decorated* trailer so they could haul out the ambience. Perversely, it made me proud to be part of New Orleans' professional music family. Begging the reader's indulgence for the overused metaphor, but the stars and stripes on our flag represent the union of the shakers and the movers, the respectful partnership - symbiotic relationship if you want to get scientific – that forwards our nation of music.

The most heroic roadie effort I've seen was also, sadly, part of one of the most horrible episodes in Radiators history. It was an event that illuminated the strength of both stars and stripes, united by music and camaraderie at a time of national sorrow and personal loss.

The pile at Ground Zero was still smoking on October 27, 2001. In New Orleans, the band and crew were preparing for their annual Halloween run to Minneapolis. Then-roadies Rocky and Marché needed to leave at the crack of dawn for the two-day drive, so they retrieved the truck from the secure storage facility before it closed and parked it in front of Marché's Garden District apartment. Camile and I stopped by late, after ten, to load up an extra guitar and my Halloween costume. Rocky met us at the truck, and we teased him about the early departure while he stowed our stuff and then secured the heavy metal door with thick, padlocked chains.

So much for security. At five in the morning the roadies emerged from Marché's apartment to find the truck gone. Gone as in stolen.

They called the police and road manager Tim Clary. Three hours after the alarm went out the cops found the truck – empty – a few miles away at the Carrollton/I-10 interchange. Later, a few empty equipment cases were spotted along the interstate near the Mississippi state line. That's all that's ever been found of the \$200,000 or so worth of gear. Between Camile and Dave they lost fourteen guitars, including the custom-made gifts from Dave's wife and the Les Paul Sunburst Camile bought for \$650 that's now worth many thousands of dollars. Gone was Camile's slide collection, including a vintage Coricidin bottle and the glass test tube from the obstetrician's office that had contained the urine sample telling him he was going to be a father. Gone were Ed's keyboards, Reggie's custom basses, Frankie's drum kit and all the unusual percussion instruments he'd gathered through his travels. Gone were over forty microphones, cables, mike stands, guitar stands, the roadies' tools, the spare parts and connectors, and at least one plastic bottle of honey shaped like a little bear.

We later learned there are professional crooks that target trucks like ours, and the efficiency of the crime and the fact that nothing has ever turned up indicate that this was something way bigger than your average set-up.

But there we were with nothing, and it was 10:00 Thursday morning with a gig in Minneapolis set for 9:00 Friday night. Some bands would have cancelled, but not the Rads, especially not after 9-11.

While waiting for the police detectives, Timmy got on the phone and rented a replacement truck. He then sent the freaked-out roadies to each band member's house to collect whatever instruments they had at home. (Ironically, band gear is covered by the band's insurance only if it's kept on the truck. If professional equipment is stolen from our house, it has to be covered by a costly rider on our homeowner's policy.)

Fellow musicians started calling. "I'm bringing a guitar over now." "I've got an amp you can have and I don't care what happens to it." Camile crawled into the attic and pulled out the clunky blue Charvelle he played in high school – the only electric guitar he now owned. When the crew came to our door Rocky, a veteran rock 'n roll campaigner, was trembling, skin pale beneath his tattoos. The wiry Marché, usually so quick with a smile, looked as if he may have been crying.

Sherman Bernard called from his sound company, instructing Timmy to send the truck to his warehouse and take anything the band needed, no charge. As the sun set on that frantic day, the roadies headed out into rush hour traffic, pointing north on I-55, racing time.

A scant twelve hours later the band boarded a plane to Minneapolis. When we arrived at the hotel, the desk clerk pointed to a large Fed Ex box at the bell stand. It was a CARE package from Peter D'Addario, whose string company endorses Camile, Dave, and Reggie, crammed

with every kind of string the guys might need. Strings! Who'd thought of strings? There had been no time to buy strings for a Charvelle that had spent the last seven years in a hot New Orleans attic, but they were there in that box along with string winders, cutters, specialty gadgets, plus T-shirts and other schwag. That brought the realization that the merch – the T-shirts and bumper stickers that provide crucial extra income – had been on the truck.

It was a nervous afternoon. We tracked the roadies' progress like a hurricane in the Gulf. At 6:30 pm on that frigid Minnesota Friday, just a couple of hours before show time, Marché and Rocky backed the new truck into the club's loading dock. The band met them there with cheers and gratitude. Eager hands helped load in the meager pile of amplifiers and the handful of instruments. Camile, with his years as a studio engineer, jumped in to help put the stage sound together using only his Leatherman tool – there were no wrenches, scissors, not even duct tape.

After driving twenty-three hours straight, loaded with guilt that they were somehow responsible for the catastrophic loss, the roadies were toast, and, like the band, completely freaked out. But they jumped out of the truck and went to work, jamming as best they could, setting up unfamiliar equipment without tools, and staying with it throughout the performance to facilitate the sound. With those burning towers still seared into our brains, life *had* to go on, despite great losses. By pushing it, by making it, the stripes became the stars – and vice versa.

As the band was waiting to go on for the encore, Dave looked at me as he sometimes does, asking with his eyes what song to play. It had to be the right one.

“The Weight?” I suggested.

“Yeah,” he sighed, stubbing out his cigarette. “Yeah.”

The band trooped back on stage. Rocky slumped against the back wall while Marché leaned on an amp case, both glazed, hanging on until the load-out. It was well after midnight.



Dave stepped to his mike and got the crowd's attention. I've forgotten his exact words, but I'll never forget the moment. What he said was something mundane like, "Give it up for the roadies! Rocky and Marche! Give it up!" But his inflection and charisma conveyed this: the band had a horrible thing happen, everyone was in shock, but there was no comparison with 9-11's disaster. Nonetheless, every tragedy has its heroes, and the band's own heroes, now working on forty hours with no sleep, had come through, carrying not just equipment, but the emotional weight of guilt and emergency. Three hundred people agreed by applause, and the band sounded the anthem:

*I pulled into Nazareth, I was feeling 'bout half past dead.  
I just need some place where I can lay my head.  
Hey Mister can you tell me where a man might find a bed?  
He just grinned and shook his head, and "no" was all he said.  
So take a load off, Fanny, take a load for free.  
Take a load off, Fanny, and put the load right on me.*

Usually the Rads play two or three songs for an encore, but that night, after that song, there was no more left. As the last note echoed into the waning crowd, the crew moved onstage for what would be a mercifully short break-down. It was a two-night gig, so the equipment, such as it was, could stay in place at the club. Small stuff had to be picked up and a few cables wrapped, but there was no need to move the amps, and few instruments or microphones to secure. Usually the band hangs around the dressing room a bit, greeting fans and winding down, but that night they stayed on stage to assist the roadies. There were no anvil road cases in which to safely lock up the guitars, so Dave and Camile carried their axes back to the hotel in taxis. By then it was almost two on Saturday morning. Club stripes swept broken bottles and smashed beer cups into large piles on the sticky floor. Nearly two full days and twelve hundred miles after the discovery of the theft, the Radiators' road crew could finally check into their shared hotel room and sleep.

I went to a show at Tipitina's a few weeks ago. In the green room's bathroom I saw this graffiti written in black Sharpie on the outside of the shower stall:

*ROADIES CODE:*

*If it's wet, drink it.*

*If it's dry, smoke it.*

*If it moves, fuck it.*

*If it stands still, load it out.*

Indeed. The musical power of the stars moves us, but the steadfastness of the stripes moves the music.

## Soul Kitchen

Life on the road is hard for a touring musician in so many ways. One of the most basic challenges is getting something healthy, simple, and satisfying to eat, much less something you might be craving, something that would be readily available to you if you were home.

When Camile returns from a tour, he is always especially grateful that he can simply go to the refrigerator and pour himself a glass of milk at will. He likes really cold milk, and knows just how long to chill a full glass in our freezer. It's always a poignant moment when he takes it out: he'll look at it in appreciation, then gulp down the delicious coldness, and set the empty glass on the counter with a happy sigh. "Milk moment!" he'll announce, smiling. It's best if the moment can be preceded by a brownie or a slice of chocolate cake but that's not necessary.

Camile spends over half the year in hotels with no frig, no milk. In his world, if there's room service and it's still open, the milk arrives a half hour after he wanted it, luke-warm, in a streaky glass topped with a protective layer of food service film. And it costs \$4.95 plus a \$3.00 delivery fee.

If you believe VH-1 and *Rolling Stone*, rock bands and their entourages enjoy lives of glamour and excitement filled with adoring fans, the hippest eateries, titillating drug habits, and tranquil moments in which to gaze thoughtfully out the tour bus window as the miles roll away. When I tell people I am married to a guitarist, this is what they envision. They want to know if the band has a tour bus and if I'm a groupie. It's hard to persuade people that we're poor, that we never see each other, that Camile is exhausted all the time.

But we aren't alone. The trade magazine *Pollstar* says there are some fifty-five hundred touring acts on the road right now, playing at over 47,000 events per week. This does not include the thousands of bands who play locally or regionally, under the national radar. Only a few of these acts are famous; only a handful actually makes real money.

Touring bands live complicated lives out of sync with the general population. For the Radiators, days are eaten up with traveling and nights are spent at work. When they want to eat, restaurants are closed, or they are en route and all they have available is airport or interstate food.

Let's look at a short sample summer tour that took place a couple of years ago when the band played outside Chicago's Field Museum on a Thursday, at a Baltimore ballroom on Friday, and at a wedding in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan on Saturday. That's an exhausting itinerary for even the most well-rested and energetic travelers. Predictably, it ended up as a typical road warrior nightmare of pre-dawn flights, traffic jams, and hotel mix-ups that made getting a meal a major challenge.

They took off for O'Hare Friday morning at seven, which meant leaving the house at five. Weather delays meant that Camile finally rolled his suitcase into his Chicago hotel room just an hour before they had to leave for the show. Not enough time for room service or to explore restaurants, just a few minutes to hang the clothes in the closet and take what Camile calls a cat bath.

The musician's body sees a concert as an athletic workout. Camile needs to eat long before a show; it's a three-hour, highly physical performance and he can't do it with food weighing him down. He tends to need a light meal in the mid-afternoon, and optimistically relies on food the venue is supposed to provide for his post-show main meal. Emphasis on the words "supposed to."

In Chicago the Field Museum had contracted to provide meal tickets good at their café. That was great, but the band members didn't actually get the tickets until they got to their stage at 7:30 for an 8:30 show. That's when they learned that the café was clear across the jam-packed Great Lawn and that it closed at 9:00. There was no way to get there, order food, and get back before they had to start playing, and no runner to help. So no dinner.

This is an on-going problem. Although the band tries to build meal availability into their schedules, it's too easy for something to go awry. Alternatives are rare, although in Chicago the chance of finding late-night food is reasonably good, and the band has a favorite hotel based on its proximity to acceptable all-hours restaurants. However, at a corporate park Sheraton in suburban Atlanta, or at mom-and-pop motels in Aspen or Nantucket, there is no room service and no 24-hour restaurant. If there is, chances are it's a Denny's with food that will kill you, literally; a Denny's All-American Grand Slam breakfast has about 828 milligrams of cholesterol, three times the recommended daily average. On our representative night in Chicago Camile found a late-night corner store, but a sandwich and pint of milk set him back about twenty dollars.

Friday morning began with a 6:30 lobby call so Camile had to be up by five. Because the equipment truck could not get from Chicago to Baltimore in the time available, Friday's show was a backline gig, meaning the promoter provides all the stage equipment needed except for the guitars and bass. Thus, four or five guitars and one or two basses, all clad in heavy silver Anvil road cases, have to be checked as luggage. To keep surcharges down, everyone in the band must haul a road case in addition to their own suitcases and carry-ons. On Friday this delayed everyone's passage through security and left Camile just enough time to grab a fat-laden muffin and a juice, which freed his wallet of about eight bucks.

There was one delay after another in Baltimore. Kenny, the band's production manager, went straight from the airport to the club to deliver the instruments and oversee the setup. No nap there, nor food. He ended up eating from the hotel vending machine. The band got a bad deli tray after the show, with green meat and stale bread. They refused to touch it.

Hotels are not reliable food sources. Their restaurants are notorious for closing between lunch and dinner, which is just when Camile needs to have his meal. Room service is fun as a romantic splurge, but as a component of daily life it's rarely healthy and always expensive – if it's available.

Every once in a while the guys'll end up in a condo or a room with a kitchenette, but most often there's no way to heat food or keep it cold. No way to store a pint of milk overnight—or even between afternoon check-in and the end of the night's performance. I remember once, when the band was in Aspen, walking past their hotel and identifying each band member's room by the food items stored on the snowy window ledges. Some hotels try to serve the traveler by providing 24-hour mini-convenience stores, but these are disappearing as recession cut-backs go into effect.

The travel back to the upper Midwest for the wedding in suburban Detroit was equally tedious but offset by the gig's relatively hefty payday. Sunday, as Camile and the band tried to make their way home, the plane ran into weather over Missouri and had to land in Little Rock thanks to fuel limitations. It was a lovely day in New Orleans, but Camile's final plane didn't touch down until after eight at night. Fuel limitations indeed: he went the entire day powered only by an airport bagel and just one bag of airline pretzels.

Finally at home in New Orleans, our garage door closed behind my Honda, Camile pulled his heavy suitcase from the trunk and wheeled it directly into the laundry room. He then headed

for the kitchen, and opened the frig. He stood for a moment, just gazing, and with all the import of Gabriel lifting the trumpet to his lips took a long, deep swig of milk straight from the gallon jug

Like the Radiators, a lot of road warriors follow this grueling schedule week in and out. I think of Mark Mullins and the rest of the guys in Bonerama, or the Iguanas, or Marcia Ball and her band. Food demands special attention within this lifestyle because good fuel is so important, its availability is so uncontrollable, and because awkward timing and bad quality can play such havoc with the artists' physical performance capabilities as well as basic comfort and health.

All too often the guys, stuck on the Jersey Turnpike, will have the choice of not eating at all or pulling into a Roy Rogers. Generally, their strategy is to look for food that they hope won't mess with them too much. Subway is reliable, and they'll sometimes throw the dice at Asian food all-you-can-eat buffets, when they can find one that doesn't look too scary. Imagine Camile's relief when Burger King added a 360-calorie, zero-cholesterol veggie burger to its menu.

The logical place to build some control into all this is the club or promoter booking the gig. Bands have contract riders that specify what they want for food and drink at the venue, although meals are a negotiable item. If the club or promoter doesn't want to deal with food, they negotiate a buy-out, that is, they give the band money in lieu of providing the required lunch or dinner. Buy-outs are great because it puts cash in the pocket, but it's not so great if it's three in the morning and there's no way to exchange that cash to feed your starving self.

The band pays itself a per diem, but forty dollars doesn't go very far in cities like Chicago or San Francisco, so Camile has learned to take advantage when the promoter provides a chance at a meal. If the club has a restaurant attached, it will usually provide a meal before the show or direct the band to order off the menu. This can work out fine but has the equal potential for great danger; there is a tendency for the house manager to show up in the green room just as the band is heading to stage and flip a menu at them while impatiently announcing, "Hey guys, the kitchen's closing in five minutes so if you want something, you better order it now." Nice. There's a three-hour set ahead, and it's a safe bet that that to-go box of seafood pasta will not be properly stored at the recommended temperature in the interim.

Typically, though, the club provides the band with either an aluminum foil pan of food from a nearby eatery or the ubiquitous deli tray: a plastic platter of meats and cheeses encircled by browning celery sticks and whitish-looking carrots, stale bread and condiments, and, if your band is stylin' with a hit single, some chips for the side (or for breakfast). Deli trays can run upwards of a hundred bucks, though, so clubs often practice their own style of "reducing, reusing, and recycling" when it comes to their hospitality responsibilities.

Camile interprets the green room meal as thus: "If there isn't a restaurant, and you don't get a buy-out, and they try to feed you, you get one of two things. The first is the Rock and Roll Special. This is spaghetti and red sauce. Red sauce, not meat sauce. There is no meat in a Rock and Roll Special because that costs extra.

"Then, of course, there's the infamous deli tray. Most people are under the mistaken idea that there are three types of meat on the deli tray: turkey, ham, and roast beef, but it is really all the same meat. Turkey is turkey. On Day Two, it's ham. By Day Three and thereafter, it takes on a distinctively deeper and darker color and becomes roast beef."



Some road warriors have adapted well to the realities of the deli tray. Frankie Bua, the Rads drummer, owned Mande's Restaurant for years and has figured out how to make a great soup using the hotel room coffee pot and deli-tray veggies he dices up with a chef's knife he packs in his luggage.

Whenever the topic of road food comes up among civilians, someone invariably mentions green M & Ms (an issue with the Rolling Stones, whose most famous rider demanded that all green M & Ms be removed from the candy dish) or references the scene in *Spinal Tap* when Christopher Guest's character Nigel Tufnel complains about the size of the sandwiches backstage. For Nigel, the meat is too big and the bread too small, but the band's manager tries valiantly but unsuccessfully to explain to the petulant rock star that he could just FOLD the meat before he puts it on the bread. The depressing thing is that we still see this ultra-hackneyed behavior for real when we brush up against the Flavor of the Moment at a festival.

After a gig, after the hollow disappointment of the dubious deli tray or no post-gig sustenance at all, the band returns to the hotel and, most often, finds no food options. It's three in the morning. Room service is long over. Vending machines offer overpriced sodas and chips. If the stars are in alignment, it may have been possible to stash a half a sandwich and a pint of milk on a snowy windowsill, but then the temperature has dropped and both have frozen solid.

Desperate times lead to desperate measures. There is the age-old if not gross-sounding temptation to cruise the hotel hallways for room service trays left outside for housekeeping pickup and peek underneath each silver dome to see what's left. (This is assuming that the hotel has room service.) If someone didn't eat his dinner rolls, well, hey! Beats starving. (I have never done this myself but have been very, very tempted.)

For me it never fails that, when I am on the road, I always end up eating chips for breakfast. Frito's, Ruffles Sour Cream 'N Onion, whatever was on the deli tray the night before or in the vending machine ends up as my morning repast because I am in a hurry to get to an airport. Never fails. Life needs to slow down when I find myself eating chips for breakfast when I'm NOT on the road with Camile. Unfortunately, he doesn't have that option.

Parenthetically, I shouldn't knock vending machines. Last winter the Rads were caught in a major East Coast blizzard and were trapped for two days at the Newark Airport Rodeway Inn. They found one Chinese place that took three hours to deliver—that they delivered at all was a minor miracle—and supplemented the Deluxe Fried Rice and Garlic Shrimp by breakfasting on, yes, chips from the machine.

Brint Anderson, who fronts his own band and is an award-winning chef, hauls a large Rubbermaid container with him wherever he goes. It holds a couple of skilletts, spices, flour, utensils, and other culinary staples. "My food strategy is that I bring my own shit and cook it," he says. "We usually have friends who offer their kitchens because they know I can cook my ass off. I went up to play in Wisconsin and made gumbo for some people up there and flipped them out because they'd never eaten anything like it."

It's nice to get the time to go to people's homes, but that's a rare treat for a hard-touring band such as The Rads. One complaint heard from many New Orleans bands, though, is that wherever they go, people serve what they think is Cajun food. It's hard to be rude to people who are trying to be nice and provide a little touch of home, but the food is usually awful. "Never eat fried food outside of Louisiana," Dave Malone, the Rads' lead singer and other guitarist, says wisely.

It's all too easy to have something disagree with the stomach. Malone always carries a large bottle of Tums in his gig bag. He has excused me, once or twice over the years, for raiding his bag (a violation of personal space equivalent to going through a woman's purse) when I admittedly had a dire need for a handful of what he calls "rock and roll candy."

The worst thing is to get food poisoning and then have to play. This has happened to almost every musician I know. Once Camile got a hellacious attack, the kind where you get chills and sweats and stuff coming out of both ends, so to speak. The gig that night was a dark, low-ceilinged club with just a little cubbyhole for a backstage area. The only bathroom was on the opposite end of a jam-packed dance floor, and there were no doors on the stalls. He fought it as long as he could and finally had to put his guitar down in the middle of a song, jump off stage and into the pit of sweaty, writhing bodies who all wanted to grab him, and force his way back to the head. Pretty gruesome.

Every once in a while, though, there is a great road food experience. It's always a good thing at Minneapolis shows when Wingnut the Caterer shows up with a vat of his homemade wild rice, and we love it when we're in New York City and have time to meet friends and check out a swanky restaurant (although the best restaurant anywhere else gets smacked down by any New Orleans eatery on any day. Outside of New Orleans, the foodies are just pretenders.)

The absolute best road meal Camile and I have ever enjoyed was served family style at our friend Jon Hart's gracious Marina District apartment, many years ago, on a rare night off in San Francisco.

Jon called that afternoon. He was terse. "Come eat. I got some crab."

So we went over— Kenny the Sound Guy came with us, too—and with a couple of Jon’s ladies (Mrs. Harts du Jour) we helped tape a thick layer of newspaper on the dining room table and sat down as Jon brought out platter after platter of fat Dungeness crabs the size of Frisbees, fresh that morning from a guy he knows on the wharf. Bowls of garlicky melted butter were set out, and we sat at that table and drank wine, gossiping and arguing about music, sucking on giant crab claws as melted butter rolled down our arms to our elbows. We leaned back, sated, music drifting on the candlelight. Slow, deep breath. Tomorrow may bring chips for breakfast and fluorescent deli trays, but right then, at that one moment, road food was as simple and good as a cold glass of milk from the frig.

## Head Laundry

I love live music, especially when played by seasoned, gifted artists who love sharing their joy with the listener as much as they love making the music itself. When there's a terrific musical conversation taking place on a stage, I want to be in the front row, hear every nuance of interplay and see every glance among the players.

I started young, as a folkie. Following along at my brother's heels, I parked my junior-high butt on the dusty wood floors of Minneapolis coffee houses to hear acoustic groups such as Koerner, Ray, and Glover holler old blues, Dave Ray's silken vocals weaving among dual guitar lines and punctuated by Tony Glover's melodic harmonica. I felt as if I was being allowed to stay up late at the grown-ups' party.

The grown-ups in the musical household of my childhood included a classical choral conductor, an avant-garde flautist, and fans of both Jimi Hendrix and Charlie Parker. Thus my ears were equally exposed to Bach's B Minor Mass and be-bop. Classical music was too stifled, too scripted for my budding tastes, and while I think Louis Armstrong out-blows any heavenly sounds Gabriel may issue, jazz's more modern permutations scrape on my nerves like a cloud of mosquitoes.

Do we find our passions or do they find us? My rear-end progression from coffeehouse floor to well-worn barstool came easily, and in between I spent enough time on the dance floor to learn that the rock and roll backbeat rules my backbone.

It's ironic, then, that after a long courtship that included lots of front-row dancing and backbone shaking, I married a musician – in fact, the lead guitarist for The Radiators, one of the

country's most vibrant, oft-playing rock and roll bar bands – only to become increasingly unable to enjoy live performances, especially Rads shows.

It didn't start out that way. I was a huge fan – a groupie, if you will, in the sense that I traveled from Colorado, where I lived for 13 years, to see the Radiators several times a year in Minneapolis, San Francisco, and other groovy places. I was no stranger to the rock and roll touring world; in college I worked hard perfecting my dancing skills as a Deadhead, joining the rolling circus that followed Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead across this fine land. After some years, though, that scene started declining, getting too big and unfriendly, and it was then I discovered the Radiators.

In the fall of 1984 I was hiding out at my mother's condo in east St. Paul, waiting for the Aspen off-season to end so I could return to Colorado and a paycheck. Broke and with more loose ends than spaghetti, I was in the mood for a good time. A boyfriend had been raving about this great band from New Orleans; they were friends of friends, he said, and it was a big deal that they'd come up the river to play in Minneapolis that weekend. I went along for the ride, and essentially haven't been home since. We walked in to the bar – a joint called the Cabooze- I heard the opening notes and found my feet propelling me to the front of the stage, found myself laughing as the two guitarists swapped one-liner wisecracks and impossibly clever, complicated licks. I was enchanted. The Rads could provide me with what the overblown Grateful Dead could no longer give: intimacy and intelligence. I remember thinking “They're good, and they're having fun!” I wanted to be part of that, and they welcomed me in with a big musical hug.

That's one thing (among many) that the Radiators can do as well or better than any other band: bring the audience into the picture. I've given this a lot of thought over the years, and I really have no desire to be on stage, making the music, but I am completely ecstatic when I can

respond to the music as it's being made. Any performer who brings the audience in, who recognizes and feeds into the audience energy, is enjoining my cause. If I know the performers the experience is all the richer: it's flattering to be noticed, to have my request honored. I'm a DJ at heart, John Hiatt's "Radio Girl," "living for that three-minute song," and I just love being in on the joke.

Rads guitarist Dave Malone is a natural clown; he scoops the crowd into the palm of his hand when he first steps to the mike with his big Irish grin and goofy "Howdy, y'all!" In contrast, if my husband, Camile Baudoin, who was once described by the *L.A. Times* as "the dourest Cajun to ever take the stage," should offer such a greeting, he'd be met with flat silence and an audience that suddenly resembles the flounder selection on ice at the grocery. Every band needs a front man, and the Rads are fortunate that Dave has that gift: all he has to do is wave hello and everyone waves back and is engaged. For so many years Dave made me feel as if I was Queen of the World. When I'd first met him he'd just acknowledge my presence with a smile, and later, after we got to know each other, he'd toss me a sideways look to see if I heard a specific lick and if I liked it. I'll never hear the end of it if he reads this, so I'll stop now, but my point is that he's got the right personality for the job.

Dave creates fortune-cookie sayings. "It's just like music," he loves to announce, "only different!" At one point there was a website devoted to Dave-isms. My personal favorite Dave-ism was offered up one night in San Francisco just before the band launched into something complicated that they'd never played before. "We're gonna fuck this up!" Dave cheerfully told the thousand or so people jamming the floor. "But we're gonna fuck it up like *professionals!*

It was so profound I wrote it on a bev nap and later made him autograph it.

The Radiators also employ the most vibrant and varied repertoire of any current musical act. The on-line Bouillabaisse Radiators database presently lists 1,668 songs, but that doesn't yet include The Drifters' classic "This Magic Moment" which they broke out just last night. About half those songs were written by Ed Volker, a few by Malone, and the rest covers. You can see five or six shows in a row and never hear the same song twice. Sure, there are set-list staples and enduring crowd-pleasers, but the odds of hearing something completely unexpected are wonderfully high.

For years there was no comparison: the Rads were the best dance/laugh-out-loud-fun musical experience ever. I branched out to other groups—the Subdudes, Marcia Ball, Little Charlie and the Nightcats, the Sundogs—and I found a whole world of ecstasy out there in bar rooms and small dance halls, waiting to be had for a cover charge and the willingness to stand in front of loud monitor speakers while over-enthusiastic fans sloshed beer on me, swaying out of time. I discovered lots of great music, and great musicians, but nobody did it for me like the Rads.

What drives some of us to find our spiritual selves be in that front row, to wade through crowds, to follow a band around the country, or even to go see live music at all? In his excellent book *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imaginations*, Robert Jourdain explores the physiological and psychological reasons humans crave music. Not surprisingly, mood enhancement is the primary motivator, he says; as well as our need to experience a song's meaning, to find a message in the music. We also look to music as an expression of social symbolism (classical music presumably projects an air of aristocracy, while rock and roll represents youthful energy) or solidarity with a peer group.



More importantly, those of us who are “expert listeners,” who have experience with the specific songs as well as a genre, are able to anticipate predicted chord progressions and other musical ideas. Therefore, we can quickly process those ideas and free up the brain to consider newer, more adventurous musical ideas and performances presented against that familiar framework. We look for, and find delight in the deviation. “Anticipation,” says Jourdain, “frees a mind from surface detail, allowing it to probe for deeper relations.” When presented with exceptional music, Jourdain says, we can rapidly comprehend the multiple layers of rhythm, melody, and lyric and are able to isolate – and thus appreciate – standout performances.

It was for all of Jourdain’s reasons that I latched onto the Grateful Dead in the late 1970s and that I continue to seek out those few performers – such as The Radiators - able to feed the anticipation of marvelous, interesting music and provide actual, unexpected music that does not disappoint.

While the music itself is important, the listening and dancing processes are essential. Listening to music is doing head laundry; it’s the chance to put the brain on autopilot and let the “spin” cycle fluff and air out the tangled mess in one’s head. Dancing is the physical connection, the often-needed discussion between brain and body, with the former being forced to shut up and quit being so analytical and the latter commanded to remember how to move with grace. Dancing to rock and roll will eventually melt the steel ropes in my shoulders back into muscles while connecting my leg bones with my toe bones and my head bones and neck bones. When the music itself is magical, or when the words of a song stab deep into my open heart, or shine through a hole in my memory, I go to a different place, a place of grace and laughter.

The story of how I got tight with the band and, later, how Camile and I fell in love is a longish one. The *Reader's Digest* version: I became friends with other members of the band and their then-manager, and because I wasn't boffing any of them, and because I worked at a groovy little public radio station and promoted musical performances, and I'd like to think because I'm funny and smart, I eventually was admitted into the inner circle as a Friend of the Band. That was a glorified place, and I loved being there.

As the years rolled by, the friendships tightened, the late night stories built up, and the band became my family, as evidenced when they started letting me stay in the dressing room while drummer Frankie Bua changed shorts, a unique privilege extended to few others, including wives. That only fed into the intimacy I experienced whenever I joined the audience and, as Champion Jack Dupree sings, "My feet got happy and they started to dance."

It's a happy, rollicking world, sometimes. Well, at least those times when the band isn't being swatted around the air travel system or stuck in traffic on the Long Island Expressway in August or being robbed by managers or poisoned by bad food.

Humor greases the wheels, and road life is fodder-filled. There are always running jokes: over the course of a three-week West Coast tour a group of fans constantly heckled Dave to play a song technically called "It's a Fine Life" but popularly known as "Shorty" because – duh - it's about a guy named Shorty. (Set lists are very fluid, with band members, particularly Dave and keyboardist Ed Volker, free to add, alter, or omit songs at any point along the way. While Ed writes almost all the Rads' songs and shares vocal duties with Dave, Dave wrote and sings "Shorty" and thus would be the one to petition to get the song played.) The fans razzed harder each night while Dave resisted, I don't know why. Nonetheless, at the tour's last gig, Dave announced to a crowded green room that yes, he was gonna open with "Shorty." Resolute, he

walked onstage, strapped on his Fender, looked down into the house, and there, in the front row, was a midget. An honest to God midget. Everyone involved got a case of giggles because how do you play a song called “Shorty” to a midget? From the wings I watched Dave pretend to be tuning while he composed himself. (There’s a similar story about playing “Gummin’ Your Nub” at a soundcheck as a legless guy in a wheelchair rolled in, but that’s for another day.)

Even though I hung with other band members I really did not have much contact with Camile before we met one singular July day in Breckenridge, Colorado. It was like a bad Hallmark television special, but with one kiss we both just *knew*. As things went on I was too stupid in love, or maybe blinded by the sparkle of the rock and roll ring to take a close look at the proposed job description of Band Wife. I wonder now if I would have taken on the title so eagerly had I known what I was giving up. I completely low-balled the stressful impact of giving up long-time friends and a prestigious job in Colorado for the low wages and loneliness of my first years in Third World New Orleans.

As I started getting closer to Camile, and my life became more entwined with – and dependent on – the business of the band, it became harder to be a dancer down in front, to be loose, free to laugh and joke. It sounds cliché, but Yoko Ono is the ever-present ghoul who dominates the thoughts of every band member and spouse. Even my mom understands me when I talk of the Yoko Syndrome; it’s a prevalent and predominant image embedded in the minds of anyone who watched the Beatles’ painful breakup. Will she come into the studio? Try to influence musical decisions? Try to be a member of the band? When I married Camile, suspicions were immediately cast upon me. I’d crossed an invisible line. I now had an interest in how the money

worked, and in the booking schedule. Sadly, I was no longer a pal. The inside jokes and intimacies were revoked.

My perspective also changed. When I moved from Colorado to New Orleans I did not anticipate how much I would be viewed as nothing more than Camile's wife. For example, when people called to extend dinner invitations, I would delightfully accept, then apologize that Camile was on tour and won't be able to come. "Oh..." came the awkward pause. "Some other time, then." Other band wives report the same phenomenon, and I've since developed a close group of friends and better conversational strategies to deal with those types of situations, but it really put me off.

I don't like being involved in Camile's business relationships, and I'm not good at dealing with it, yet his business success is an essential component of our shared financial portfolio. It's an extremely stressful lifestyle; travel and gig schedules change daily, one can't plan holidays or vacations, Camile is gone almost every single weekend, and money is tight and unpredictable. One of my first big fights with the band (through their manager) was about claiming a date for our wedding amidst their tour schedule. My viewpoint altered from being the pal, the friend accepting of their scheduling realities, to a wife's expectation that her husband's business should make accommodations for unique situations. What a difference a ring makes.

Gradually I stopped dancing down in front, or even going to shows at all. It was no fun to be glaring at Dave or have him glaring at me. I can't shake the negativity loose on the dance floor when they're the ones on stage.

It's also harder now, as a wife, because I can't stand down front for more than ten seconds before someone comes up in my face, wanting to know me because I am Camile's wife,

or to yack about how great a player he is just as I'm trying to listen to his solo. I appreciate their love, but sometimes their enthusiasm can be intrusive.

I feel many pairs of eyes watching me, stripping away the anonymity and friendliness that once let me drift away on the music. I've finally had to stop dancing at Rads shows in all but the rarest places because I can't let myself go while under constant observation. Even last week at Tipitina's, normally the friendliest of houses, I jammed out on one song – just basic dancing, nothing energetic – and endured relentless comments afterwards: “Wow, you sure were having a good time!” “I bet Camile had fun watching you dance!” and “Man, we were all in the balcony watching you let loose!” I wasn't letting it loose. I was trying to shake the muscles free in the manner I've followed for years. I can't obtain ecstasy under watchful eyes..

A few summers ago, while driving up to Minnesota for my annual vacation at my cabin, I realized I was mourning. I had got what I wanted in my relationship with Camile, but I'd lost what I had with the band. I'd lost an essence of myself, my history. Straining northward through the flat, dusty heat of Arkansas and Missouri, I sang the Dobie Gray classic to myself: “Give me the beat, boys, and free my soul, I wanna get lost in your rock and roll and drift away...” I wanted to be alone in the dark, dancing to loud, happy beats, in a place where my relationship with the music and the musicians – and the energy flow between the artists and the listeners – had not been compromised by the Scarlet W. I wondered if I could ever find myself in that magical drift away space again.

But, as Dorothy noted on her return from Oz, happiness can be found right in your own backyard and at the end of the highway one just may find a pot of gold. My first day at the cabin

is always shopping day, and exiting the Stillwater Liquor Mart I pulled a *CityPages* entertainment guide from the rack.

Back at the cabin, I flipped through it as I ate dinner, not really paying attention to the music listings. Minneapolis is about an hour away and a long drive home over dark, two-lane country highways, deer and sheriff's deputies lurking on every curve. Butter dripped onto the newsprint as I munched into my second ear of sweet corn, and I was greasily turning the page when I saw the familiar logo for The Cabooze. "The Dudes," it read, "Friday, July 5."

Aha, I thought. There's my therapy. The Subdudes, my old Colorado running partners, had broken up several years earlier, but just recently had re-formed. Legalities prevented the use of the "sub" prefix, but the new/old "Dudes" featured three of the four original members and three new ones. I knew all the old guys, and all the new ones, too, but I hadn't yet seen this configuration. I hadn't even heard any road reports from the Dude-heads I knew. The proverbial ray of hope shone – manifested as a flippy anticipatory feeling in my stomach.

Led by Dave Malone's brother Tommy on guitar, anchored by keyboardist and songwriter John Magnie, and driven by percussionist Steve Amedee, the music of the Subdudes is gorgeous, full of richly-textured vocal harmonies and evocative lyrics. Steve uses a trap set every so often but usually he plays only a tambourine, and it's unusual for a rock group with electrified instruments to not have a drummer. (It's a more subdued sound, hence the name.) They were big favorites at KDNK, the Carbondale, Colorado public radio station where I worked for almost ten years. We played them, they played for us, and we watched them grow from popular Denver bar band to national major-label touring act.

When the original group broke up, it was bitter, and the last show of the farewell tour was so sad – I wandered around the crowded backstage, watching the manager make up what would

be the last set list, feeling like I was losing a friend. It took a while for that to sink in; in fact, it was on that summer evening in Minnesota, as I flossed the corn kernels from my teeth, that I got the snapshot: My lord, I thought, I've been grieving for them, too! I lost the Rads, I lost the Subdudes...but here they are, back again. Will they sound the same? Is it resurrection? A chance for redemption?

I felt like a teenager: Friday night would never come. But it did, and at eight or so I drove up through the wooded river valley to the prairie above, and headed towards "The Cities" in the azure twilight of a perfect high summer evening. The lush emerald cornfields, speckled with the evening's first fireflies, melted into outer suburbs, miles of ugly new tract housing and warehouses on the urban edge, then across the Mississippi to Cedar Avenue and the club.

The Cabooze stands in a small cluster of buildings on an isolated, cement-curbed island amidst a spaghetti bowl of freeway intersections in an area called, understandably, Seven Corners. Next door is a major biker bar called The Joint, and I always find it absurdly reassuring to see the massive line of Harleys, gleaming with testosterone, strung along the curb from one end of the block to the other.

(Once, while leaving the Cabooze, my friends and I came across a very inebriated hippie standing at the top of the line of motorcycles, ready to kick the first one and watch the whole row go down like so many dominos. We finally convinced him that having the shit beaten out of you by a hundred wasted bikers isn't worth it for a sight gag.)

I'd made a phone call earlier that day to bassist Jimmy Messa, one of the three new Dudes, to see if they had any time to come out to the cabin and to ask him if I could be on the guest list. I asked him to keep it quiet that I was coming; I wanted a low profile. I didn't want to be a wife or radio personality or promoter. I just wanted to be a fan, to dance and have a good

time. Jimmy chuckled – but he understood implicitly. I wanted it to be a surprise, but I'd called him to make sure someone knew I was coming.

I got there early because Tony Glover was opening. Since I first saw Koerner Ray and Glover as a teenager I'd worked with both Tony and Dave Ray – Dave becoming an especially close friend. Both of them played on a record I produced. I wanted some face-to-face with Tony to get his read on Dave's health, which was tanking with cancer, and for some business trivia.

I was shocked at the light turnout—although in the summer it's hard to lure people inside into a dank, smoky bar, and even harder to persuade them to pay ten bucks to see a band when so much free music is offered in more pleasant outdoor settings. There were only a dozen or so people in the room, including the sound guy and the waitresses. I felt guilty about asking to be on the guest list; I'd actually thought it might be a sell-out.

The real dressing room is in the back past the pool tables, but Tony, being the opener, got stuck in a little alcove behind the stage. We'd arranged earlier to meet after his set, and I was so wrapped up in business with him in that little closet that I missed both the Dudes' arrival into the building and their subsequent entrance onto the stage. I heard the familiar voices - Steve Amadee, John Magnie, and Tommy Malone, the three original members still in the band – start on a pretty *a capella* piece I didn't know. I hugged Tony goodbye and scooted out front.

Tommy was center stage, his chiseled features and coal-dark hair looking more handsomely black Irish every year. Magnie was to his left, standing at his keyboards, goatee grayer and scraggier than I'd remembered, and Steve on stage right, his single tambourine serving both bass and drum lines.

It was embarrassingly reassuring to watch their double takes go down the line as they spotted me. Tommy's face was funniest – he looked up from the guitar and obviously had to



think hard about what city he was in because he was seeing me completely out of the normal contexts of either New Orleans or Colorado. That double-take happens a lot with musicians who tour around and have a mobile fan base. It was fun to both know the look and be the cause.

They finished the song and called the rest of the band (the “new” guys) on stage. Jimmy Messa flashed me a thumbs-up as he strapped on his bass. They launched into “Sarita,” one of my favorite Magnie songs. “I took your picture, with my Zippo/you laughed so hard that I nearly broke.” I closed my eyes and drifted away, and began connecting with a me from long ago, a me I’d forgotten. That sounds self-serving, I know, but I’d venture that every one of us longs for those moments when we can shed the public exoskeleton and find our loose-limbed selves.

I don’t think the Dudes knew I’d grown up in Minneapolis, but that night they *did* know they had a friend in the erstwhile audience to play to. The empty room allowed the mood to turn carefree and intimate. Some of the best shows I’ve ever seen have been inspired by nearly-empty venues: the musicians have nothing to lose so they might as well have a good time with it.

Now, there is generic fun interaction with the band and then there is *personal* interaction. There are oodles of stories of how fans – me included – applied extra or erroneous meaning to a musician’s actions or song choices.

Thus I consider it extremely presumptuous if not delusional to think this, but on that night at the Cabooze I felt like the band was playing every song just for me. I hadn’t been with the guys in the Subdudes for a long time, but we were old-time friends and they were playing me as much as I was grooving on them. When Tommy executed a really impossible lick I’d laugh, then open my eyes to find him laughing back at my reaction, just as his brother Dave used to do, that “did ya get that stoopid thing?” connection. No politics, just acknowledgement of long-ago times and the magic of right now.

The guys on stage, they knew me from *before*. Before I was a Band Wife, before the politics got in the way. They didn't see me as Yoko, they just knew me as, oh blessed yes, a Friend.

Tommy's voice has a unique, compelling timbre, and as he joined the others in elegant, tightly woven harmonies my memory launched me back in time to a me and a them when they had no Atlantic contract, just a demo cassette charting on the big Denver commercial station and on our little KDNK in the mountains.

I memoried back to the night we all first met, another golden summer evening a decade earlier. The radio station had booked them for a benefit at the Where House Lounge in Carbon-dale ("Where Shit Happens") and they roared up to the mustard yellow pole building, crammed into Tommy's rusty, muddy 4 x 4. They tumbled out like gorgeous puppies and we Dinkel Girls of KDNK fell hopelessly in love. (Marcia Ball told me shortly thereafter, "Take a number and be prepared to stand in a very long line.") Despite that warning, in our idle hours we Dinkel Girls parceled the Subdudes out among our fantasies like we did with the Monkees when we were six.) No matter, as the band played that first Where House gig we all knew we were onto something very special, both musically and emotionally.

Over the ensuing years we - Subdudes and Dinkels - hung around together, and I'd see the band sometimes out on the road. They knew me from Colorado, from my pre-Wife life.

They knew me from wintry post-gig mornings spent recovering from the night before, mornings after nights when one or more Subdudes bedded one or more Dinkel wenches, all of us re-convening at the Village Smithy in the morning, tired, sucking coffee and smiling (other Dinkel Girls smiling more than me, left celibate by Camile's relentless touring schedule), offsetting our massive hangovers by devouring equally massive, greasy breakfasts. Any one of the boys could catch my eye and know the night's secrets were safe.

They knew me from exceptionally hard-partying all-nighters and as several of us struggled for sobriety, from times when we celebrated births and mourned deaths.

They knew me from the camaraderie at a special concert at the ornate, jewel-box Aspen Wheeler Opera House. Although the show was sponsored by commercial giant KSPN, the band demanded that I be the emcee, even though I worked for a rival station. In deference to the Joke du Moment, I went to the mike and asked the sold-out crowd to "Please welcome, from New Orleans, that metropolis of edibility, the Subdudes!" I turned to the wings to applaud them onto stage, but they couldn't believe I'd actually worked the reference to cunnilingus into my patter and were laughing so hard that they nearly broke, as the song goes. I had to jam a bit to hold the crowd an extra minute while the band regained their composure.

And there we were ten years later on a July Friday at the nearly-empty Cabooze. I danced, and they knew and I knew and they played and I laundered and every once in a while we'd catch each other's eyes and laugh. They remembered, and played to those memories in their music. There were no politics, no wife bullshit. Just clean fun, as they say. The Subdudes are as much my peeps as the Rads but without the accompanying baggage. They've known me through so many nights and years and miles, before Camile, after Katrina. I feel like they're brothers in musical arms.

I was pretty trashed by the end of the night, more overwhelmed by emotions than the cheap bar chardonnay. I wanted to leave without talking to the band, because if we'd started talking I would have tried to explain the magic and it would have turned out that Tommy never played anything to me, he just had a blister on his foot. Or, worse, he might tell me that he had a blister even if he didn't, in his maddening Malone way, just to leave me wondering. I caught

Messa's eye and thanked him for the ticket, waved a vague goodbye to the rest of the guys, and floated out past the row of gleaming Harleys into the soft summer night, riding a soap bubble floating in the moonlight.

I got to sleep around three in the morning, snuggled up with the dogs in my screen-porch bedroom overlooking the river. At seven my overachiever neighbor, who insists on keeping a lawn amidst our forest wilderness, cranked up his mower and then a wood chipper. On a previous morning I would have been angry, frustrated. But with my freshly-laundered psyche recharged, I could ignore the buzzing and drift back into dream.

## Ring of Fire

*October 31, 2003*

Tonight I sit in the shadows on the dark edge of the stage in a Minneapolis hotel ballroom as the New Orleans Radiators rolled into a thumpy, joyful version of the Johnny Cash hit, “Ring of Fire.” This is one of the first times the band has played the song; Cash died a few weeks earlier, thus the tip ‘o the Rads’ musical hat.

*Love is a burning thing  
and it makes a fiery ring  
bound by wild desire  
I fell in to a ring of fire...*

The roadies are hard at work. Safely out of their way, I sit cross-legged on an amp case, hidden from the house by twelve-foot high speaker stacks. This is the band’s eighteenth Halloween here, and some seven hundred long-time fans in various degrees of costume are shaking their bodies down to the ground. A survey of the room before the lights dimmed told me that the crowd is predominantly local, but backstage I ran into fans from New York, Colorado, San Francisco, and Florida.

At special shows like Halloween, a roomful of familiar faces sets an entirely different tone for the Radiators. They look out from stage and see a family rather than an anonymous audience. At the same time, the crowd generates its own special energy when so many people know each other. It’s what makes Minneapolis shows so special, this transition from meeting room to living room, and as the musicians settle in on the stage equivalent of the big comfy couch, their playing becomes more sophisticated, looser.

On nights like this the band upends its legendary trick bag of repertoire, crammed with some sixteen-hundred originals and covers, onto Ed Volker's piano and in the process long-forgotten, oddball songs roll out into the set list. Tonight, one of those surprises is "Ring of Fire," a tune guitarist Dave Malone proposed in the dressing room a few minutes before the show.

As of tonight, the five members of the Radiators have been together for twenty-six years (they picked up and then dropped a percussionist along the way). As teenagers, they cut their chops under the watchful eyes of true artists like Professor Longhair and Earl King, and they've done more than their share of time in Bourbon Street strip clubs and Chitlin' Circuit roadhouses backing singers who constantly changed up the rhythm, tempo, verse structure, and business arrangements.

Now, on special nights such as Halloween, their rich experiences and influences coalesce into creamy froth and finesse. Notes sparkle from guitars and cascade from the keyboards. Frank Bua's bare feet dance on the kick drum pedal. His eyes are shut, head cocked, listening. He's also laughing, talking and joking with himself, the host of a very private party attended by four identical twin brothers. Frankie has this thing: every time he brings his drumsticks up off the snare he spreads his fingers just enough so that the distinctive red and black-wrapped sticks hang in the air for one millionth of a second before falling back into his grasp. It's as if he's daring himself to stay on the bubble, to stay loose in the zone.

In the house, well-versed fans know that the monkeys are out of the box. They—we all—thrive on these exceptional performances and intimate conversations. The energy is almost visible as it flows from band to crowd and back. I've been with the Rads in far lovelier places—a Maui beach at sunset, a fog-enshrouded stone terrace high above the pounding waves of Big

Sur, Aspen's gilded Wheeler Opera House—but tonight the vibe in this slightly tatty, utilitarian Minneapolis Holiday Inn ballroom is special, palpable, a 10-40 weight soap bubble upon which music and energy shimmers and everyone dances.

But not me.

I want to hide in the darkness, unseen. I want to feel safe enough to let my brain stretch and wander privately.

*“Love is a burning thing/and it makes a fiery ring.”* Random thoughts flash by like roadside markers: The circular energy flow between musician and listener is a recognized phenomenon, Rings are circular. Why, I wondered, did I pull Cash's “The Sun Years” off the shelf and pop it into my car stereo the day before he died? Why had the song's aggravating mariachi horns been stuck in my head since then? Why did the Rads choose *this* song to pay tribute to The Man in Black? Why is that Donovan song suddenly popping up? *“Happiness runs in a circular motion, thought is a little boat upon the sea.”*

Circular imageries kaleidoscope through my mind: Frodo whirling through the flames in *The Lord of the Rings*; the symbolic power of the wedding ring; the emotional power of our great circle of friends, so many out there in the dark tonight, joined together by this band, not a band of gold, but a band of troubadours. I ponder how my life has changed so drastically over the last decade, how easily life shifts from bliss and “wild desire” to burning hell and circles right around again. Circular sound, though, equals feedback (okay, now I'm really veering off), so sometimes it's necessary to break out of the circle, to undulate, flow like a river, to move forward in life.

All that and I haven't even smoked pot.

But then the stage spots change from red to white, sparking up the wedding band on my finger. I contemplate my husband, Camile Baudoin, just a few feet away, anchoring the band on

stage right (that is, he's on the right side of the stage if you're looking out into the audience; the complementary term would be "house left"). Camile's played lead guitar with this same group of men for over a quarter of a century. He looks damn good for fifty-five, I think. Back in the day, when I hung out with other members of the band but hadn't yet met Camile, I thought he looked far more like an electrical engineer than a rock star, with his thick-framed glasses and ill-fitting shirts crying out for pocket pencil protectors. I confessed this on our first date and he played into it with what I learned was a deep-seated and confident sense of humor. "So you think I'm someone who would have...this?" he answered, flashing his digital wristwatch, the kind with the thick black band and enough functions to program a space satellite. He became a magician with a robust rabbit supply, waiting for conversational opportunities to pull out another item in a seemingly endless collection of nerd gadgets: personal organizer, electronic dictionary, volt meter, geek-level engineering calculator. I adored him for that. He can't rest in a hotel room until he's figured out the heating and cooling system, which often means using tools he carries with him for that purpose. Whenever I get impatient with his Popular Scientist compulsions he'll flash his Leatherman tool at me and ask me how many times those compulsions have saved my butt, and I quiet down.

Camile's square Cajun head and sprouty hair earned him the nickname Dagwood—or Dagger, or just Dag – and it's true, he does bear a resemblance to the comic strip character. He's tall enough so I can look up into his brown eyes, and he tries hard to keep his solid frame from running to fat. His hands are ordinary-looking, fingers slightly splayed. They can coil a microphone cable in a perfect West Coast wrap, re-plumb a sink, and caress me in unique and always astonishing ways. He keeps his fingernails carefully trimmed – the post 9/11 carry-on rules have played havoc with his need to always have clippers and file – um – on hand. Over the years, the



calluses on his left fingertips have become so deep and permanent from pressing wire-wrapped guitar strings that they have acquired his fingerprints.

When Camile and I first got together we were both emerging from other marriages, and no matter how much we yearned for each other, we had to honor our prior commitments. We were desperately trying to stay away from each other, and it was awful, especially at shows. One night, at an acoustic gig, keyboardist Ed Volker launched unexpectedly into a Bob Dylan classic. The band sings the refrain in close harmony, hymn-like:

*I see my light come shining  
From the west unto the east.  
Any way now, any day now,  
I shall be released.*

I had to step to the back of the small dance floor, out of the stage lights into the dark, not really caring if anyone saw me crying but not wanting to advertise my private pain. Camile couldn't look at me, couldn't look into the crowd at all. It seemed to me, though, that tears fell from his fingers each time they touched the strings.

I first saw the Radiators in 1984, here in Minneapolis. I moved to Colorado a couple of weeks later, but loved the band and my Minneapolis friends and family, and so I undertook regular pilgrimages to my home town for "Rads weekends," when the band would play a couple of public gigs and a private party hosted by a group of friends known as the Krewe of DADS. I knew a couple of the DADS, and got invited to the private shows, and the after-parties, and the before-parties, and I pretty much had a good time all around. I met bass player Reggie Scanlan on a swank DADS Mississippi River cruise, and we were instant friends, sharing a love for photography and blues music. We hung out for years along with former road manager Tim Clary. Everybody thought I was doing Reggie but I wasn't. It was important for me to not fuck any-

body in the band because then I'd be just another groupie, not a friend. Camile associated with another clique and our paths rarely crossed.

Camile and I did finally, truly meet with one quick impromptu French kiss just before a late-afternoon soundcheck at a giant Colorado ski resort. Reggie and I went together to the soundcheck but as soon as we walked in he got waylaid by a well-filled sweater. What I remember next is Camile striding in from the opposite side of the stage, so focused on the task at hand that we collided. We uttered startled "Hi!"s and then, propelled by some force that neither one of us can explain, we kissed. With tongue. I'd said twenty words to the guy over the previous ten years, but in those ten seconds we knew we'd always known each other and always would.

Sure, we'd spent hours in the same green rooms and after-show party suites, but I'd really never talked to him. While I hung with Reg and Timmy, Camile ran with his own insular, more party-hearty crowd. He was the shy guy, the weirdo hanging on the fringe.

The phrase "falling in love" does include the verb "to fall," and by agreeing to the process we agree to live with the same stomach-wrenching panic felt when the ATM receipt tells you your account is overdrawn or that slo-mo moment just before the other car slams into your front fender. It's entering into a world of unknowns with an absurdly unrealistic faith that you and this total stranger will somehow be able to defy gravity and leave this fallen world far below. Making that leap of faith is hard when previous failures are still fresh, and when so much feels so uncertain.

And that's where epiphanies come in – sometimes while dancing in the front row, but sometimes when you least expect it. As Jerry Garcia used to sing, "Once in a while you can get shown the light in the strangest of places if you look at it right." That place, for me, was a rented Galant on a crisp October day along I-95. Our relationship was finally underway, and although

we were living in separate cities and our separations achingly long, we were having a marvelous weekend together on the East Coast. I'd flown from Colorado to Washington DC, arriving at the Bayou club while Camile was in the middle of his set. The next morning we drove the rent-car towards the next night's show in Richmond, Virginia, Camile at the wheel.

It's a straight shot down the interstate, so the co-pilot's navigating duties are light and leave lots of time for landscape-gazing. From the passenger seat I found myself staring at Camile, entranced by the way his hands rested on the steering wheel, light and comfortable at the proper ten and two position. He is no body-builder with bulging biceps, but his right arm moves up and down many thousands of times in the course of a three-hour concert, and he wears that strength quietly, assuredly. There was some sort of music drawing me in as I stared at his arm, the low autumn sun spinning each hair into red-gold threads. His steely flexor muscles lay unpretentiously under his smooth skin; resting confidently, subtly, understating his indomitable will and inner strength.

I recognized that sight. It was my father's arm in the old blue station wagon on the way to Montana, my brother's arm as he shuttled me home from piano lessons, my husband's arm in twenty years' time—this man's arm. An internal, eternal bubble of truth burst open inside me. I knew it wasn't about the band, or the music, or the parties. It was about folding laundry and stirring spaghetti sauce, a slow dance around the living room, writing a check to the retirement fund and hoping it will someday be enough. I knew that instant that we would grow old together, banking the fire every night to keep the embers glowing.

Not too long after that drive, on a sunny January day on Royal Street in the heart of the French Quarter, Camile slipped the diamond on my finger.

Tonight, from my stage-side perch I watch Camile and Ed as they take their solos. The two met in kindergarten and have been friends ever since. They've now been together over fifty years. They discovered Ray Charles at a time when nice white families in New Orleans didn't listen to that kind of music. Ed's a brilliant poet with the accompanying personality. Camile often says that Ed doesn't really live here; he just visits our planet from time to time. I refer to them as the oldest living married couple in this or any other world. They have a secret way of communicating unknown to us mortals. The other members of the band, Frankie on drums, Dave on guitar and vocals, and Reggie on bass, also thrive on that communication, although they don't have the almost lifelong connection that Camile and Ed share.

Nonetheless, as I listen to the Rads blaze through "Ring of Fire" it occurs to me that their communications are so *sub rosa* that almost no one in the audience has a clue that the band has rarely played this song before. Now Camile slightly dips the neck of his emerald green Paul Reed Smith down and to the right, signaling to Ed that his guitar solo is wrapping up at the end of the next chorus. Ed cues the rest of the band with a telling chord change and as a single unit they nail the ending on a dime.

Malone loves to say that the band is too *stupid* to stop, but they stop so tight right now that I laugh out loud, and in doing so, startle my wandering thoughts quickly back into their seats. I become aware of the room around me, the cheering crowd. Chris and Jenn, my long-time running partners, have been dancing in front of Ed; I see them laughing delightedly too, pointing at Camile and waving beyond him to me. Camile realizes they're looking at someone behind him. He turns, and our glance is quick and confident. It mines the certainties of the ages just as surely as did that kiss so long ago. He turns back to the stage to tune for the next song.

My friends point to the space between them and gesture “C’mon!” I slip out through the barricades and slide through the costumed crowd into their welcoming arms. Ed starts tinkling the keys, Frankie and Reggie swing in behind, Camile and Dave finish tuning, and all merge seamlessly into the redemptive “Death of the Blues.” The band plays, we dance, the ring of fire wraps around us and the music, and the light burns clean.

## VITA

Mary Elizabeth (Missy) Bowen received her B.A. from Grinnell College in 1981 and has lived in New Orleans for fourteen years. By day she manages the Department of Music at the University of New Orleans, and on Thursday nights her blues and boogie show can be heard on WWOZ-FM and world-wide at [wwoz.org](http://wwoz.org). Her honors range from the Iowa Press Association's "Best Sports Photo" to the *Ellipsis* literary journal's Editor's Award for Nonfiction. She has been published in *The New York Times*, and featured on CNN and in *USAToday* for her contributions to community radio. She spends as much time as possible in her native Minnesota at her cabin on the St. Croix River, a federally-protected Scenic Waterway, and wishes the critical and vanishing Louisiana coastline received the same considerations and protections.