



Vacation Paradise Lost

In the summer of 1968, my parents got an itch to get out of suburbia with us kids in tow and made plans to drive to the far reaches of our property on Traverse City Bay. I'm not sure how much land we owned, but it was enough to name a street after us, and my Aunt Helen too, news I only found out recently. I was a one-year-old at the time, so I don't remember anything about the trip, but I certainly heard about it. For my siblings, that camping trip represented a time before my parents completely fell apart, while they still strived for what I like to call the Brady Bunch vibe. Carol and Mike were the ultimate cool parents, because they never drank, smoked cigarettes or fought, or at least the way my parents did. They were always around to help solve the kids with their problems. In our family, the kids were expected to solve the problems of their parents. In truth, the only thing we had in common with that make-believe family was the ratio between boys and girls. I guess I'm Cindy.

All of my five siblings talked about this one camping trip in 1968 at some time or another. It was one of the staples for our family lore, a story we told to convince ourselves that our family wasn't so bad. Even though I have no personal memories of the trip, I have heard different versions of the story so often that I can hear their voices and see what happened.

Cager told the story the most. A few years ago, after our parents died, when I began poking holes in our family stories, looking for secrets, I asked him about the infamous camping trip. He was visiting us in Scottsdale, which seemed far away from Michigan, with our prickly

pear cacti blooming and the gravel burning my toes in the backyard.

Cager and I were having an evening ice tea on our patio. He looked at me with a quirky smile when I asked. "Our parents were so ghetto." He rolled his eyes and shook his head when he said so.

"What do you mean?" He had used that term once before when he described the scene in which he witnessed our mother, standing butt naked in bed, pointing a .22 rifle at our father's head, who cowered underneath the covers. I hadn't understood what he meant by "ghetto" then, either.

"God, you don't remember that camping trip, do you?" Just like Forrest Gump always found himself in the middle of significant U.S. history, Cager could be found in the middle of our own personal family drama of every important scene.

"I was just learning to walk, for cripes sake."

Here's what I participated in, though I don't remember.

Our family started getting ready for the trip to our land up north a few days before we were to leave. Mother was the only one who could pack worth a damn, organizing all the meals, utensils, pans, clothing, camping gear, bows and arrows, slingshots for the boys, dolls and sand toys for the girls. One of the aspects of this trip that stood out the most to my siblings was the fact that the tents, and other gear that wouldn't fit in the wooden-paneled station wagon was roped to the top of our roof.

"Mom was drunk before we left the driveway," Cager said. "Dad was having a hard time strapping some bags on the car roof, so mom jumped up there and sat on them while he tied them on. She slid off the car's hood, taking a good deal of paint off with her slippers, the ones with the flowers on them."

I remembered those slippers, because they had big, sharp daisies attached to them. They were well made, actually.

Also lashed to the roof was an axe, which my pretend-lumberjack father found necessary to lug along. He apparently liked to spend time at the campsite chopping wood into smaller chunks and feeding the fire. My brothers and sisters told me, though I knew well enough from my own experiences, that, in addition to tending the fire, father's job was to be the driver. Not that Mother was in any shape to drive, but he took the wheel of our station wagon for our three-hour trip and my five siblings and me were packed into the car. No seatbelts required and we were off.

Family legends often have a bit of truth in them. I think my family tried hard to be the perfect unit, but my parents' eccentric ways always got the best of them. The details sometimes were exaggerated to suit the teller's agenda, but I would get bits of confirmation about what was true and what wasn't when I talked to relatives. I heard about the gun from Dad's cousin years later when I visited Michigan for the first time in more than twenty years. She said the gun was used for the sheer enjoyment of scaring the deer in the woods when he went hunting with his other male cousin on this same land. The hunting trips were more about male bonding, drinking beer than strapping the carcass on the roof for the long ride home. I don't know why he thought he needed to scare deer on a family camping trip.

As I pieced the story together, there was a sense of family togetherness on this trip, and part of that must have been genuine. They killed time by playing car games: we didn't have iPods, iPhones, portable televisions, or other technology to entertain us. My siblings also passed the time in less ingenious ways: belching, hair pulling, armpit farts, or passing gas silently, which forced the innocent to roll down the windows all the way. The guilty party muttered smugly, "Whoever smelt it, dealt it" while the innocent held his or her nose, quipping back, "Whoever denied it, supplied it." I can just imagine that the backseat was enlivened with quick fiery fists and elbow jabs into the likely suspect.

Our father was prone to muttering hollow threats like "knock it off," or "wait till I get you over my knee" as he adjusted his rearview mirror just to get a good look at anybody who dared to look him square in the eyes. Not much had changed about those kinds of car rides when I was older, so I knew that my siblings knew he meant business. When he ran out of threats, he also liked to reach behind him while he was driving to catch a hand or leg of the sorry culprit. He kept his eyes fixed on driving and the road, so that evened the odds for us kids. Though I didn't make quite the ruckus my siblings caused, I'm sure I radiated ear-deafening screams a good sum of time in this cramped car.

As I've been told, my family and baby me were about an hour on the road when drivers started pointing at our car on the double-lane road and honking their horns. My father was oblivious in the driver's seat, glancing at a map spread out on Mother's lap.

"We told Dad to pull over but he just told me to shut up," recounted Cager. My dad thought he had enough people telling him what to do because Mom was yelling at him the entire trip. Just prior to our car catching the attention of

other drivers, he had gotten an earful from our mom because he had exited onto the wrong road. I can see where he thought there were enough backseat drivers.

My siblings were trying to get my father's attention to tell him that other drivers were motioning for us to pull over. "Pull over now," they screamed in unison.



I can't totally blame Dad for ignoring my siblings. Whenever they would take a car trip, as I've been told, there were many frustrating delays. Someone would invariably drop a toy or hat that they were waving out the window, forcing my dad to squeal to a dead stop and drive backwards to let out whoever dropped this or that. "You better be quick about it," he would snap, looking nervously into the rear view mirror for traffic coming up.

After a few more miles of my siblings cajoling him, Mother intervened. He pulled the car to the side of the road and got out. Cager says that he disappeared long enough for us to feel like we were competing for oxygen in the stuffy car. He said that our faces got red and we were all—except me—discarding clothes piece by piece. The Brady Bunch may have had misadventures in the Grand Canyon but it wasn't the dad or mom who would have screwed up tying the stuff on the car. It would have been Greg or Marcia, who my parents acted more like in real life. Alice would have saved the day by bringing along her boyfriend, Sam, who would have tossed the bags and tent inside of his station wagon before they left on the trip. My older siblings were more like Sam or Alice and would have made sure the tents and other gear were properly stowed.

Cager says that, after the long wait, our father came into view, looking like a hobo getting ready to hitch a ride, hunkered down with one of our duffle bags, and a tent. Our tents and duffle bags, filled with clothes, had fallen off the car several miles back. The only thing left on top of the car was the axe. I think that's why people were waving us down so frantically; they must

have been scared that the axe would fly off the car. Dad must have known he was to blame because he didn't have any of the older kids go help him and we had to stay in the car while he made a couple of trips back to get our gear.

Even though I knew the punch line—we'd lost the gear—I still felt validated, because it confirmed that my parents tried hard but couldn't manage to get little things right. "Mom must have lost it."

"Yep," said Cager. The lost gear caused our parents to bicker back and forth about how to keep the bags in place and who was the best person to do this. Mother, stone cold sober this time, got on top of the car to hold down the gear while Dad fastened one of his famous knots he learned while in the Navy.

Eventually, the gear got tied back on and we reached our campsite, a little worse for wear, and set up the tents. As dusk set in, the forest beyond the beach came alive with chirping crickets, and hooting owls. Apparently, my siblings' imaginations spun wildly. Would we awake to find a pack of wolves gathered around us with gleaming teeth and threatening growls? Up north, the temperature dropped drastically, so Mom made everyone put on thermals and extra sweaters. I had my siblings to keep me warm.

My dad found great humor in scaring us to death any chance he could get and this ominous setting was too perfect to let pass by. I remember this aspect of my father well, so I wasn't surprised when Cager told me this. After Dad built a great big fire that night, he gave the flashlight to pass around to anyone who wanted to tell a spooky story. Cager admitted that my siblings were scared enough with all the sounds surrounding them in the dark, but told spooky stories anyway. Most likely this is where my family made up tales like the "Lady with the Golden Arm" and "Nani, Nani, Lady." Later, they were passed down to me and I told them to scare the wits out of my friends.

My mom never enjoyed these trips because she was always preparing food or washing dishes, but for some reason, she did like to get in on the act of scaring us children with my father. I don't remember this, but I do recall her antics when she would pretend someone was outside of our house trying to get in through the window. She played the part well, knowing damn well that the person scraping the screen with a pocketknife was her husband. On this trip, my sister Kitty recalled that on the portable radio my parents had brought there was emergency news alert about an escapee from the local insane asylum. In fact, my siblings all told me about this and claimed that there was a mental health institution within

walking distance of our campsite that night. In recent years, I did my own snooping to see if this place really existed. A picture I found online depicted an impressive brick building with gracious grounds that held people who were mentally ill and even those who weren't, but were considered "troubled teens."

After the radio announcement, Mother fluffed her pillow and said: "If anyone sees anything strange roaming around our campground, just let me know because I have this." She pulled out the axe from underneath her pillow.

"Our parents humor was whacked, like the family in *The Shining*," said Cager. It was one thing to have a lunatic running around the forest, but my brother admitted that our parents' stability was a little questionable as well. As Cager and Kitty both admitted, at the conjuring of the axe, the bigger kids began to chatter like scared squirrels, some of them crying. Boomer and Pru, who were younger and didn't quite understand that brandishing an axe wasn't that entirely safe, attached themselves to Mom's leg.

When I asked my sister, Kitty about this, she sniffed and said: "Yes, Mother had the axe stuffed under her pillow. It scared the heck out of me."

"Was I scared?"

"You were too little to be scared."

On cue, Dad bellowed, "Pipe down." He walked away and pulled a .22 rifle he borrowed from his cousin out of the car. Suddenly, everyone heard a round of shots ring throughout the forest and they all hollered out.

Our first night at the campsite must have been restless for everyone but me; I slept like a baby since I still was one. Mom preferred to do the food prep and cooking herself but she'd send my older brothers with buckets to fetch some water to clean our dishes. The kids had taken off towards the forest, or to the lake to swim or fish. Dad sauntered back early to keep the fire stoked, but it was his chance to smoke his pipe in peace. After dinner, the clouds parted to reveal a starlit sky. I was told that we all sat around the campfire to keep warm, toast marshmallows and tell another round of scary stories. There was still an imminent threat of the lunatic running around the forest, but my siblings claim the thought wasn't as threatening as that first night. And, I don't believe that it had anything to do with dad shooting off his rifle or mom pulling out the axe.

Over the weekend, I learned how to walk well and fast. Mother stood me up on the rocky beach with smooth, flat rocks peculiar to the region, called Petoskey stones. My brothers gathered them and stuffed them in their pockets, challenging their pant seams, to skip, three, four,

or five times across the smooth water. At the beach, she let go of my hands and I stood. Only once did I fall bloodying my knees. I never crawled again.

By the time I would have been old enough to get something out of camping, the trips had stopped. The camping was more work than it was worth and my parents had high hopes to reacquaint themselves with the high-flying lifestyles they had growing up in their respective families who were wealthy. They still ran in wealthy circles, and had wealthy friends, and wanted to keep up appearances. No one in their circles knew that, to keep afloat, my parents borrowed money from their parents. While my grandparents on both sides had been well-heeled hoteliers, and investors, my father couldn't hold a job.

To capture that glamour, they arranged a trip with some of their friends to Europe and Northern Africa, to see museums, ride camels, watch flamenco dancers and drink sangria. They would leave us kids at home, so it would be the ultimate luxury.

Since they didn't have any extra money, they resorted to selling our land. It was our only possible assurance that we wouldn't be put out on the street, but of course they didn't have that foresight.

They ended the trip early, because my mom found out while she was abroad that she had a brain tumor. I remember them coming home with castanets, a lacy fan they kept on our mantel, a senorita doll and some sheiks on camels that were actually pretty cool, because they were leather and handmade. A few days later, she was in the hospital for surgery and then spent weeks in recovery.

I was five at the time and there was no pretense of vacations after that. The tents were stowed in the rafters of our garage, but they were never brought down again. I assume the tents were sold with the house when my mom and dad got divorced the year I was eleven.

We only went on one other trip--Mother took me on a Princess Line Cruise, just like the Love Boat that employed Julie, Gopher and Captain Stubing. It was just the two of us, without my siblings taking center stage. One night, eating dinner at the Captains table, I sat between a woman who was dying of cancer and a minister. Mother sat across from me and I watched her take the hand of the man next to her and slip it in the hole in the back of her head left from the brain surgery, like she used to do with me when I was a little girl. Mom thought every man could be a potential man for her and father to me. She tried to be the fun mom that night,

telling stories, but I just heard her overbearing voice. She missed personal cues and screwed up the punch lines. I wished I had another mother.

Not long before the cruise ended, she took me on a beach adventure that I didn't want any part of. I watched her from afar, safely on the beach as the speedboat in the water sped away. Mom ran down the hot, sandy beach and suddenly took off in the air with a parachute on her back for parasailing. Brain surgery to remove the tumor had caused deafness in one ear. She misunderstood conversations with people standing next to her, not to mention frantic hand signals and shouts from the Mexican men on the beach to pull the cord. Mom responded by waving excitedly back as though she had all the time in the world. Unlike the other tourists I had watched, who had floated down like dandelion fluff to the beach, she ended up landing in the shark-infested waters. Mom walked back towards me drenched from head to toe telling me: "M.K. That was a gas. You have to try it." I just shook my head and I slunk away feeling the heavy weight of embarrassment.

Reminders of my father's hand in sexually scarring me were never far from my mind, even when our ship docked in Mazatlan, Mexico for a shopping excursion. Mom and I exited the ship, slowly walking behind an adult man. At the end of the dock, two children, a boy and a girl about my age, stood. The boy tugged on the man's shirt and said in slow, broken English, "Mister, I have a sister." I was twelve and I knew the boy was pimping his little sister for money. That phrase—"mister, I have a sister"—would haunt me my whole life.

At the time of the cruise, my father had left Mom and me the year before, but he had taken away my innocence long before. I could never be just a kid, oblivious to the dark depravities of man. When my own children reached that age, I asked myself if my girls would understand what that boy meant and knew that they couldn't possibly.

With Dad gone, this was supposed to be a new start for Mom and me, but she couldn't adjust to being a single mom very well. Being a de facto only child was a role I certainly didn't want, especially without my siblings around to defend me when mom knocked herself out with pills and booze. We arrived home from the trip with matching bronzed suntans and sun streaked hair. That summer, Mother, Finney and I drove to Cedar Point amusement park and we went on The Gemini, the world's largest rollercoaster at the time. Not once did I scream. Mom said I opened my mouth and nothing came out. It was like my vocal cords wouldn't work. "Mary Katherine," mom said "I have never heard of anyone going on

a rollercoaster, unable to scream.” Now I believe it was a blessing in disguise. If I had started screaming, would have I been able to stop after the ride was over? After that, Mother never managed to travel further than her living room chair, reading the Sunday travel section about other peoples exotic journeys while taking long drags of a cigarette.

At the beginning of this summer, some four decades after my family’s last camping trip, I took a trip up north to find the property that we’d camped on. I wanted to walk the land where I had learned to walk the first time. When I visited my Aunt Helen the year before, she told me that she still had her share of land. “I just sell an acre when I need the money.” Boomer had figured out one time that our land would have been worth millions of dollars had we kept it all these years. My husband, daughters and I combed the beaches, searching in vain for Petoskey stones, but locals said we could only find them for sale in the gift shops. The insane asylum had been gentrified. The old cellars and rooms where the troubled children and mentally ill were kept are now boutiques, bakeries, coffee shops and restaurants. The lawn is green and expansive with old majestic trees and is now used as a backdrop for concerts and special gatherings instead of raising the spirits of the depressed.

Had my parents been alive for me to show them how time had altered their little piece of paradise, I’m sure Dad would have stuck to the present, saying: “This is swell, just swell.” And, if I’d mention details of that camping trip, he’d laugh and admit we were all a bunch of loons and *don’t loons make a great story?*

My husband once asked me: “What do you think your life would be like if your parents still had this land in your family?”

“I know I wouldn’t have gone to Los Angeles. I would have stayed out here to go to school...maybe I would have gone to the University of Michigan.”

“I’m sure you would have, M.K.,” he quietly told me.

My eldest daughter overheard us. “Would you have picked Dad today as your husband if you still had that land and that money? Would you have met Dad?”

My husband, Ben and I looked at each other, too stunned to say anything at first. Then Ben said: “If she hadn’t met me, you wouldn’t be you and wouldn’t life be boring without you?”

We still have a street sign named after our family as proof of our roots, just like we have old newspaper clippings of the grand hotels my grandparents owned in Detroit. I realized that people are never meant to really own any part of

nature for too long. It’s best to pass it along to others so they can create their own stories in their pieces of paradise. So, my parents weren’t the best financial planners in the world, and wouldn’t life have been sweeter had I more money? That my parents would sell the land for a trip to Europe to impress their friends when they barely could feed us kids still amazes me. The land was a legacy that I could have escaped to every year when the suburbs became unbearable, yet it was all gone before I could even care about it.

At about the time I returned to visit our lost legacy, I had nearly finished with coming to terms with the lives of my parents. I realized being privileged and landed often comes with its own set of problems and that a paradise lost doesn’t mean all legacies are erased. One of the better legacies I had came in the form of stories about my families camping trips.