

## LOVE OF TRAVEL

The best meal I ever had was a can of baked beans on a hot August night in the middle of Nowhere, Nebraska. And I don't even like baked beans. The year was 1997, and like many of my fellow generation Xers, I was lost, derailed from what had once seemed a simple and clear existence. At the time, I was working for a big hotel chain to whom I was more of a number than a name.

I went to work uncharacteristically early one day and fidgeted and fumbled about in an anxious sort of way while waiting for my shift to begin. My thoughts were a train wreck - a scrambled mess of this and that. Shortness of breath ensued, followed by a hopelessness that my happy-go-lucky nature was unaccustomed to.

The senselessness of the world, or at least my place in it, took hold of me. Within minutes, I was scooting out of the parking lot in my Volkswagen bus, no explanation given, not a word to anyone of my hasty departure. Once home, I scraped together some cash by any means possible then frantically loaded the Volkswagen with supplies while my ill-functioning mind raced out of control.

After a difficult night's sleep had come and gone, I was on the road - my Jack Kerouac prescribed alter ego "Sal Paradise" perched behind the wheel. The lonesome traveler was born and gunning it for the Canadian border for no particular reason. Spontaneity assures people of unforgettable memories. Ill-preparedness assures of obstacles. My conversation with a Canadian border official went like this:

"Why are you coming into Canada?"

"I don't really know."

"Where are you going in Canada?"

"I'm not really sure."

"How long are you going to be in Canada?"

"Hard to say."

"Do you have a job in the states?"

"Well - I used to."

"Wait right here!"

After some heartfelt convincing that I wasn't a lunatic, as well as the phone call made to my folks to vouch for my sanity, Canada opened its gracious arms to me. And off I went. The realization of a dream was my guide as I drove into the Canadian night. Travel is a journey, not a destination. The realm of possibility becomes magnified upon leaving our safe havens in favor of the unknown, and that in itself is reason to travel.

I fell in love with the open road - the utter newness of each experience, the wind against my face as a crayon box of colors rippled through the sunset sky, the sputtering, high-pitched rumble of a Volkswagen engine as it meandered along backcountry roads. Suddenly I understood Jack London, Buck and "The Call of the Wild."

Everything I saw and did was both weird and wonderful. I left all concept of time and days back in Colorado. My mind was sharp and my senses fresh as if I was experiencing everything for the first time.

One particular afternoon stood out among all others. After securing a campsite for the night, I motored to a nearby national park that featured an impressive expanse of sand dunes. Sand dunes? ... in Canada, I thought. The trails were bare of other trekkers except for a few other misfits like myself. Plodding through sand makes for difficult hiking and after a couple of hours, I was ready to get back to the campground. Besides, it would be dark soon.

The sand dune gods, though, had other plans, which involved testing my resolve. At first I thought it amusing that I had gotten a little lost. An hour later, I now knew I was a lot lost. In another hour it would be completely dark - just me and the Canadian wilderness. However, my joy over my newfound love of travel was stronger than my fear of spending the night with large, dangerous animals that lurk in the moonlit shadows.

And then, at that moment, I did something that makes me laugh to this day when I think of it. I fell into the sand and created the most perfect sand angel I had ever seen. Okay, it was the only sand angel I had ever seen. I popped to my feet and busted out a carefree grin, smiling madly in the face of adversity. I took a picture of the angelic figure - my new symbol of not taking life too seriously - and continued my search for the trailhead. Within half an hour, as dusk began turning to deep black, I was out of the dunes, carrying two pounds of sand in each shoe.

My road weaved in and out of interesting places, exposed to me to many feelings I didn't know I had, and introduced me to many wonderful people along the way. My yearning for adventure grows more each day, but that road trip through Canada provided the seed.

Travel cannot be experienced from within the gated confines of a Club Med. It's about meeting interesting people from various backgrounds, intimately exploring different cultures. In the end, we come to realize that through travel, we learn as much about ourselves as we do the rest of the world.

So on that first night of my personal journey, I sat inside the Volkswagen at a rest stop in Nebraska cooking baked beans over a candle. My soul leapt and felt alive. My mind was engulfed with possibility. Freedom is a good thing, perhaps the best of things. And I was drunk on it - giddy and wild and loving every drop.

That night I ate my baked beans under the glow of fluorescent streetlights and among the faint hum of diesel engines. And I was happy. In those two weeks I found a bit of myself out there on the open road, the part I knew had been missing, that piece I needed to feel whole and fulfilled. I guess it's true what they say. It is always in the last place that you look. For me, that place was Canada.