

CHAPTER SIX: Road Trip

Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road.

~ Jack Kerouac ~

By the second semester of her junior year Dana was struggling with symptoms that mirrored nervous system conditions: agitation and sleep problems. From the beginning she had experienced swelling, fatigue, and body pain, but more symptoms kept developing. It was never the same from day to day—some days were better, some days worse. I had become deeply concerned as the agitation and sleeplessness grew worse. Precious time ticked away while something attacked my daughter. There was a mad woman inside me running stark naked down the middle of the street screaming for help.

I had to take action. I was terrified of brain damage after reading about nervous system disorders, ready to try anything and everything. Around this time I ran into Cheryl, an old friend and health practitioner, who recommended we try the Life Vessel, a device developed to balance the autonomic nervous system, increase lymphatic drainage, and detoxify the body.

During Dana's spring break, we flew to Santa Fe for the first in what would become a series of treatments with the Life Vessel at an alternative health clinic, hoping they would resolve her difficulty sleeping, relieve her pain, and calm her anxiety. Once there, a diagnostic test of her autonomic nervous system revealed that she was indeed agitated and had difficulty calming down. The Life Vessel, an elegantly crafted, large coffin-shaped box, is where Dana rested for her first hour-long treatment. Joanne, the

owner of the clinic, made sure she was comfortable and warm, then closed the lid on the box and started the treatment. Inside, a star formation of lights in primary colors flashed above her eyes, and gorgeous classical music filled the space with sound as the foam bed on which she lay vibrated. Joanne explained that this system was designed to utilize sensory stimuli to engage the body systems for the purpose of healing disease.

I sat reading and praying in the waiting room. I prayed that these Life Vessel sessions would transform Dana back into a normal teen. I visualized her strong legs running on the track at school, or jazz dancing in our studio at home. I saw her tumbling gracefully through gravity on aerial silk. I peered over her shoulder as she finished her homework at the kitchen table, and I listened while she gossiped and laughed with friends.

When we returned home after Dana completed the treatment, she was too weak to go back to school. Joanne had told us she would need several series of treatments in order to “turn the corner.” Our lives had been stuffed into the pocket of a discarded garment. Dana lay on the couch in excruciating discomfort while her classmates went to the Spring Prom and finished their junior year, so I decided to schedule a second series of treatments for her a month later. Exasperated with her isolation, and furious that she wouldn’t be moving on to the senior year with her class, Dana insisted in a bloodthirsty voice that I *drive* her to Santa Fe for the next treatments.

“I’m going completely crazy! All I do is sit on the couch while my friends are enjoying their lives. I have to get out of here! I’m sick of staring at the four walls of the living room. I will die if I don’t have a change of scenery!”

She was desperate for anything to distract her from the loneliness, pain, and agitation she felt. I needed time to think about this. How could I risk taking her out of the house in her condition? What mother would take her sick child on a road trip through the desert? In spite of my fears, it didn't take long for me to make my decision. It was clear to me that I had to do something to keep Dana from despair, so I amassed maps and calculated distances between places of interest in California, Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico. I began to get excited! The vision of Thelma and Louise became our inspiration. We were getting out of town, breaking the rules, checking out of our daily lives at home, being impulsive, and defying the debilitating illness that gave us no vacation. We were rebels following Dana's intuitive calling. Really, we were two women in a blue Lexus wagon piled high with food rations, pots, hot plates, silverware, dishes, a blender, pillows, clothes, alkaline water, and an oil diffuser—all the essentials. We were bound for adventure!

We drove out of Los Angeles at sundown so there wouldn't be any sunlight to irritate Dana's sensitive eyes—a troubling new symptom. Five hours later we stopped in Kingman, Arizona, at the Holiday Inn Express, where the lobby smelled like Pine Sol. I piled everything packed in our car onto the rickety baggage cart, including bags of Chinese foot patches—two-by-three-inch adhesive rectangles infused with zeolite for drawing out toxins. I snuck through the hallway to our room, barely controlling the cart. I moved us in, unpacked, made Dana's bed with the fresh sheets we brought, and began cooking dinner: quinoa and vegetables prepared on our own hot plate. I prepared food that had been prescribed for the alkaline cleanse diet she had recently adopted. The cleanse was meant to

create enough alkalinity in her system to kill off any microorganisms that might be causing her illness.

We woke at noon. Dana took out her camera and immortalized me bending over the cart making myself an almond butter sandwich for the road. She thought it was funny, but I knew I had to be prepared. I had to make sure I ate enough before we headed out because I couldn't stop the car along the road if Dana was asleep for fear of waking her to her discomfort. She always felt uncomfortable and sleep offered a respite. "Mom, just keep driving, don't stop. I need to see the scenery go by, I need to be distracted from the pain." After I loaded the car and Dana applied the two Chinese patches on each foot, we headed toward the Grand Canyon.

At an overlook we took in the cavernous cleavage in the earth, marveling at the layers of rusts and golds flaming in the sunlight. Dana and I moved gingerly down a path, admiring the canyon's majesty. I did not know then that this would be one of only a handful of times she would be able to get out of the car to see the sights on our trip.

Years ago my father had joyously taken me, my sisters, and my mother to see every geyser, paint pot, and thermal spring in Yellowstone National Park. After that trip he took us camping on weekends and vacations to as many state and national parks as we could drive to in our blue Ford station wagon. He built a wooden box and strapped it to the top of the car to store our camping gear, old hiking clothes, and frying pans. My father wanted to show us as much of the world as he could, driving us as far east as Wyoming, as far south as Mexico City, and as far north as Vancouver.

In this moment I became my father and enthusiastically took Dana around the entire perimeter of the south rim, with drive-by close-ups of every scenic viewpoint. She leaned out the window with her camera shutter flapping. It began to hail as we stopped at a scenic lookout. I ran outside to gaze at the view and hurried back to the car. “Dana! You have to come see this!” As I helped her out, we were pelted by tiny frozen snowballs. The light was ethereal at sunset in the hail, and we were both awed by the dramatic vista of blue sky and dark clouds over a vivid palette of earthen colors. Caught in a moment of freedom and shocking beauty, we doubled over, laughing as hard as the wind blew. Dana, enveloped in swirling white specks, raincoat billowing wildly, stole my heart with her smile.