

Now and Then by Happenstance

BY KATRINA JOHNSTON

Once or twice – and a few times by sheer and crazy happenstance – Ann Marie may have actually become a genuine adventure seeker.

Wipeout.

Remember?

Maybe?

Try.

Or – try it not.

Oops, another memory sails on past.

She remembers, but doesn't always accept what memory means.

What if she never had a bold adventure? Not really? Not likely? And worse... What if Ann Marie never tries again?

Now.

Remember then.

Mix it up.

Now.

She stays at home and watches reruns. She eats chocolate covered almonds and chocolate covered cookies and other chocolate things. Dreams of adventure stall against advancing age and dreams etch hard complexities.

Opportunity seeps, sleeps and then it fails.

When she is honest, and this is rarely, for there is great reluctance to examine the present, or the past, or the future; not even to analyze by hindsight – Ann Marie admits the circumstances when she packed up her life and flew about, or she took the trains and buses to wander within her country, were probably occasions born of lassitude. Her plans were hatched inside the doldrums. She never bolted, or wandered off the continent, or dared for ultimates.

When she went, she was tentative. She scheduled safe departures, sure arrivals and her end-zone stays. She never aimed to go international. Okay, she went once to California – San Francisco – just that once.

Canada was her stomping ground.

She was then, and still is now, fluent in English; can't imagine any other. Not even basic French – *cuit demi français. C'est vrai.* Not even 'français.' by Berlitz.

Then.

Ann Marie squashed her conventional wardrobe into conventional luggage. Black on grey. She moved via local transit or by taxi to the Greyhound stations and she caught the ferries or other buses to the airports – outbound to another Canadian destination. From there, she'd slide into the safety of another cab to be escorted to a temporary residence – economy rates for hotel-motel, or a B&B, or a hostel with a creaking door that would not close properly.

Privacy.

And the bathroom existed down the corridor. Yeah, there were a few roughing-it-type accommodations such as that – but not the usual.

In Ottawa, she stayed in a youth hostel housed within a refurbished jail. Slept fitfully, feverishly, outside the cells. Death row? The place was haunted. Her dreams were chains and desperate ghosts dressed in prison stripes.

Thinking.

She did not stay for long in any destination.

Now.

The older she becomes – she’s in her early sixties – holding on, hoping she appears young and fit; she cannot find the reasons to pack the suitcase, to travel one more time. Ann Marie is glued to Victoria, BC, although more recently she had to go to Vancouver – puddle, muddle, jump.

She battles with arthritis and a lack of funds.

Then.

No one person in any of her visited places voiced concern that she’d never found a way to define herself. She hid her doubts; an expert pretender. Even now, she still retains the cancelled ticket stubs for proof she went.

Then and Now and Then Again.

She does not boast a lofty career or a long-time relationship. Ann Marie never married. Her parents died many years ago. Although there is an extended family, the bindings are forgiving and elastic.

Never had an ounce of fame.

Ann Marie is casting about for an elusive purpose. She drowns herself in borrowed novels and Sudoku puzzles and more quantities of chocolate covered edibles with dark roast coffees and too much cheese.

She first went travelling many years ago – age 23.

And Recently.

An extended eastern journey. She went all the way to St. John’s, Newfoundland. The Atlantic magnetized. Wild and rocky outcrops, crashing surf. Nature exploding in raw and fearsome randomness. And icebergs sailed like pirate ships. And blueberries grew on Signal Hill.

She meditated with a group of Buddhists halfway up the hill – and beyond that happenstance she befriended solitude.

There was a man.

When that didn't work – in fact it shattered in about a zillion jagged pieces of angst and absurdity – she came back to recover, heading as far away as possible, vowing not to try again. No. Never that again.

She may die before she's lived.

Hiding in Victoria.

Saskatchewan.

Mid-country. Mid-travel. Muddled intentions.

In between her youth and St. John's, she thought she'd buy a house in Kamsack which is mid-southern Saskatchewan, but she didn't dare the gamble. Real estate was cheap. The town was crinkled and uncertain.

Emptiness.

And another trip into graceful Montreal where the women wore such beautiful, long and paisley skirts and had great shoes. Pedestrians launched themselves fearlessly against the traffic lights. The coffee shop waitress switched immediately to English when Ann Marie dared her quelques mots seulment.

Mais non.

Maintenant.

Au Revoir.

Ann Marie is riding the coastal ferry away from the Tsawwassen terminal toward Swartz Bay, returning from a family obligation – the funeral of a distant relative.

She lives in the James Bay neighbourhood, a place that is quieter than a crypt.
Whitecaps dance upon the waves in Active Pass.

The ferry slows. Wind catches in her throat. She is leaning over the railing of the upper-middle deck, trying to drop a penny over the side so that it sticks onto the skirting of the lower decks where it might shine a copper glint back at her.

And Canada doesn't honour dull or shiny pennies anymore. Each carefully dropped copper is swallowed by the waves.

The last penny plummets, lands and holds, winks sunshine up at Ann Marie, causing her to nod. Score one for Ann Marie. One against the sea.

Wind.

Ann Marie leaves the rail. Her pennies are her sinking thoughts.

Remembering.

Forever sick with a strange inflammatory disease which is worsening the original arthritic underlay, Ann Marie's illness is largely undefined and it creeps upon her, adding bouts of laziness, vertigo and a paralytic anguish.

And money worries too.

Reminder: buy a lotto ticket. Scratch to scratch 'n win? Get busy.

Ann Marie would require a new rolling suitcase, a scarlet one, or a floral pull-me fast. Turf the basic one she scorns.

There was another major trip when Ann Marie was 25-26.

The Maritimes.

Before that, she had idled through the prairies, pulling-up in Winnipeg. That was grey. But the stately elms arched their bodies overhead along the pleasant boulevards, making tunnels of enfolded green, forming a regal canopy.

A jig or two meandering around in southern Ontario. And Ann Marie was busy admiring the nation's capital. Ottawa is (apparently) a good clean place along the Rideau Canal. The majesty of Parliament impressed. Pretty-prissy Ottawa boasts the Peace Tower (when she was out of hostel jail, that is). A tourist quest.

Then, a spell up north and she gaped at the Northern lights in silent gob-smacked admiration, stopping often along the dusty roads connecting old town to new town at Hay River in the NWT. She'd always thought that the aurora borealis would crack and splinter noise, but instead the colours danced in quiet grace.

And when she felt like resting, Ann Marie noticed things.

A strange phenomenon, but a common mystery.

A pair of sneakers hanging from the power lines.

Even in a sensible place like Halifax, as she strolled quietly past the cemetery and along Spring Garden Road – there they dangled.

Everywhere.

Then. Ann Marie took a keen notice of this unusual sight in various destinations. She could not help but let her mind construct the precedents.

Maybe a teasing sibling had played a trick on a younger one. He or she had stolen the shoes, snagged the laces loosely and in the stealth of night and in true jealousy, or in spite, or with an absurd attitude of playing a joke, and uploading a dose of warped humour that the owner of the shoes would never truly forgive, the prankster had then flung the Adidas to the heavens before returning back inside. If asked about the disappearance of the sneakers – the conspirator would say:

“Dunno anything. You must have left your shoes at school.”

It's all too plain; too ordinary and unique.

Ann Marie wonders whatever do the birdies think?

Or the hydro crews?

And the shoeless?
Or the shoes?

Perhaps a homeless person had despaired about ever owning decent footwear? A person taking drugs? He or she had managed to score some almost-new Reeboks from the Good Samaritan Fellowship or the St. Vincent de Paul Outreach. Disgruntled with the old worn out sneaks (the older ones tattered to the state of useless holes and squelching leaks) he or she had tossed the discards to the universe.

It always caused Ann Marie to realize that wherever she goes, she lives within the bounds of gravity and the unexplained.

When she went searching for a new life, she heard the usual things, spied the ordinary sights and met the same quaint visions of the predictable.

Objet d'farce?

A lonely feeling when she arrived at a bus depot in the twilight – a dog barking in the distance. Many strangers hurrying someplace.

Remember Kamsack?

Searching for the hotel? Through a fierce winter frost, a crisp night and a coyote yowling at the fog. After he had done his canine song she saw him skulking, just like her, a low slung and stringy animal, dragging his bones, meandering down Elizabeth Boulevard East, selecting his footsteps along the ruts of ice, looking for his refuge.

In Trois Rivières, she visited the Université du Québec, but felt too shy to reveal her minimal French. Made everybody laugh. Juste pour rire.

Brief stops. And other touchstones in stolid places like Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie (the Ontario side that is) which was predictable, and she hugged the border towns.

Now.

She's back here in this tiny apartment in Victoria. Ann Marie is squashed with staid and pleasant climes.

Magnolias are in bloom. Then the lilacs.
Nights are restless.

She's wondering how she is ever going to afford paying next month's rent.

Travel is not feasible...

But...

What about places somewhere further north. Nunavut? Iqaluit and Rankin Inlet? Those Northern lights again?

Ann Marie could layer clothing beneath a warm winter coat.

Maybe?

It might be opportunity?

If she doesn't take a trip, any sort of trip, she could exist like a pair of tied-together sneakers dangling lonely from the power lines. Abandoned and strung up high; caught between the earth and sky.

And every single time she wonders once again why she does not take a risk, or at least tie herself together and fling herself heavenward, hoping for the *new*.

Or anything?

Anything but the boredom or the idleness lost in happenstance.