

13 Years in America

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 1998, I moved to America from Canada. This is the story of my 13 Years in America, with some aspects changed in the retelling.

1998

I'm trying hard to enjoy myself as we drive down the Trans-Canada Highway in George's green and white 1978 VW van. I really am. Over the past two and a half days I've told myself a hundred times to focus on the music and the conversation and the incredible changing landscape around me, from ocean, to forests, to mountains, and then to great, vast wheat fields.

But it's hard to leave Salt Spring Island behind. It's easier for George and Sophie because they're just going to a friend's wedding in Toronto, and they'll be back in a week. But I'm getting dropped off to spend the whole summer working in Fort Frances, and even when I get back to the West Coast, it won't be the same. Then, I'll just be visiting Salt Spring instead of living there. Those days, for now, are over.

I remind myself again to focus on the road ahead instead of the one behind me. We drive through small prairie towns, around Winnipeg, and finally into Ontario. The white birch

bark on the trees tells me we're getting close. We're only a couple hours away now.

George turns on to the highway south and glances at Sophie. "What are we going to tell Customs?"

"That we're just driving through."

"I hate the border," George says, turning the music down. "You know we don't have any rights there. No right to remain silent or anything. They'll grill us with questions, and make it into this big deal just to drive through their country."

"Stop worrying about it," Sophie says. "You're making it worse."

I don't blame him for being nervous. I know what it's like to cross the border, with the line-ups and the huge American flag soaring overhead. It's intimidating. Last year I went down to Seattle with some friends and we got held up, brought inside, and questioned while our car was searched. We weren't doing anything wrong so they let us go, but we were all shaking for a good hour afterward.

"How 'bout we drop Mel off and then go through Thunder Bay and around to Toronto?" George suggests.

"That's a good idea," I yell from the backseat. "Your van's a hippie-mobile, and with your long hair and Sophie's nose ring, I bet you'll get hassled if you cross the border."

Sophie sighs. "The wedding's tomorrow," she reminds us, "and going through the States will save us like six or seven hours."

"Fine," George says. "We'll do it."

Sophie turns the music up and George tolerates it until we turn left toward Fort Frances. I can see his knuckles turning white from gripping the steering wheel. Signs say to

keep right for the International Bridge.

“Turn here,” I yell. My dad’s place is up on the left. I’ve been here before, but only once, two years ago when I was hitchhiking across the country. I recognize it, but barely.

George stops in front of the garage and turns the van off. My dad and his wife Pat come out to greet us, and George and Sophie say a quick hello while they unload my things from the back. Two suitcases, a couple boxes, and a tote bag. My other stuff is stored in boxes at my mom’s in Victoria for when I get back. This is just what I need to get through the summer.

“Call me when you’re across the border, okay?” I say, giving Sophie a hug. I add, in a whisper, “and let me know when you’re coming back through in case I can’t handle it here.”

“I will,” she promises, and they jump back in the van.

I watch them pull out, and for a moment I’m overcome with an urge to run after them. I could flag them down and fling the side door open and jump in. Then I wouldn’t have to go inside or start my summer job at the toll booth on Monday. But before I can act on it, they turn on to the road, honk twice, and they’re gone.

My dad has my two boxes stacked in his arms. He carries the load ahead of him up the walkway and in the backdoor. I follow him in and take off my shoes in the entryway.

“Your room will be down here,” he says. “This’ll give you some privacy. Our room’s at the other end of the house.”

“Isn’t this your exercise room?”

“We moved everything to the side.”

A weight bench, tread mill, and TV stand have been pushed off to the far side of the small rectangular room to fit in a single bed. The one bookshelf is filled with paperbacks and movies. Stephen King, Tom Clancy, Dean Koontz.

“This’ll be fine,” I say. “Thanks.”

Pat is in the kitchen brewing coffee when we come out. She hands us each a cup, and my dad takes his into the living room and opens a newspaper. The kitchen has been redone since I was here last. Oak cupboards, marble countertop.

“How was the drive?” Pat asks.

“Fast. We left Salt Spring Wednesday morning. So it only took us two and a half days.”

“Did you bring any clothes that’ll be appropriate for work, or do we need to take you shopping?”

I look down at my velvet shirt and Indian cotton skirt. I don’t remember what I packed. “I’ll go see,” I tell her, and I bring my coffee into my temporary room.

I kneel on the floor and open the boxes. I didn’t bring many clothes, and what I did bring is scrunched up, wrapped around breakable items. I unwrap and spread my things out on the floor around me. The jewelry box and the wooden candle holder with the half burnt black candle can go on the bookshelf. The framed picture of arbutus trees on Salt Spring can go on the nightstand table with my journal. The Mexican blanket I wrapped around me on the long nights in the VW van can hang on the wall.

I sit on the bed and look around. Even a few of my things scattered around will help make this room feel more like mine for these couple months. I lay back and rest my head on the pillow. The ceiling is speckled with little

shimmering flecks. My dad and Pat's muffled voices seep in from the living room.

Then, the phone's ringing. I must have dozed off. A moment later Pat comes in. "It's a collect call from Sophie."

I pick up the extension in my room and wait for Pat to hang up the other line. "Hi, Sophie! You made it?"

"Yeah, we're in International Falls."

"No problems getting across the border?"

"Oh man," she says, "we totally lucked out. We had the coolest Customs officer. He just asked us a few questions and then told us to have a good trip. All that worrying for nothing."

"That's awesome."

"So I just wanted to let you know we're across. I have to go. We're going to drive through the night."

"Okay. Have a good time. And don't forget to call me when you come back through."

DIFFERENCES

Fort Frances is a mill town, so most of the people who live here either work at the paper mill or at a job that exists because of it. Here, people own four by four trucks and go driving around for fun. And, because the mill makes paper products, people here don't believe in recycling. In fact, when I ask where the recycling bin is as I'm being trained on my first day at work, my trainer tells me that the recycling bin is the garbage can.

“Job security,” he says.

I smile politely and look down at my black cords and white cotton shirt, the only respectable-looking clothes I brought. The guy training me is wearing jeans, though, so tomorrow I'll wear whatever I want.

The job is simple. There are two of us inside a six by ten booth that sits at the base of the metal international bridge that's privately owned by the mill. On one side of the bridge is American Customs, and on the other side is Canadian Customs. Traffic heading into America stops at the right

hand window, and traffic coming into Canada stops at the left hand window. Each car pays four dollars to cross.

“Do we pay in American or Canadian?” most people ask, and I’m instructed to answer, simply, “Either one.”

At ten, a woman about my age comes in to give us each a break. There’s a tiny washroom in the back of the toll booth, but there’s never a pause in traffic to allow a break until someone comes to take over. She relieves my trainer first.

“I’m Renée,” she says when she takes my trainer’s place.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Mel. And what’s his name again?”

“Ralph.”

“Oh yeah.”

“It’s your first day, eh?”

“Yup.”

“How’s it going?”

“Alright.”

Renée knows about every third car that comes through. She leans out the window and greets people, asking what they’re doing tonight, or where they went last night, or what they’re up to this weekend. Her laughter fills the booth as she talks.

She comes again for our lunch break at noon and our afternoon break at two. Each time she relieves Ralph first, and then takes my side so I can sit down and rest. When she turns to leave, I thank her for coming.

“Do you drink?” she asks me.

“Yeah.”

“A few of us are going out tonight if you want to come.”

“Sure. Where?”

She writes down her address for me.

“You might have to pick me up,” I tell her. “I don’t have a car.”

She laughs, writes my address down and says she’ll be by at nine.

At eight-thirty, I’m ready. I pace back to my room and glance at my reflection in the full-length mirror behind the door. My long black skirt and boots make me look even taller and slimmer than usual, and my straight blond hair falls over my shoulders, a stark contrast against my black tank top. I grab my purse and walk out to the living room to wait.

By the time Renée shows up, I’ve already been ready for an hour. My dad and Pat are heading off to bed.

“Should we wait up for you?” Pat asks.

I smile to myself. I’ve been out of school and on my own for three years. “No, that’s okay. I’ll let myself in. I’ll be quiet.”

The Red Dog parking lot is full. Renée drives through the rows and finds a spot way at the back, next to a rusty pick-up truck.

“Wow,” I say, “I didn’t know so many people went out on a Monday night.”

“People go out every night here.”

Inside, the music is blaring. The room is hot and smells of sour beer. I follow Renée through the crowds, up to the bar, and order myself a drink. Renée looks around for the people she planned to meet here.

“There they are!”

I follow her over to the pool tables and let her introduce me to half a dozen people whose names I won’t remember.

One song switches to another, then another, and I feel a tap on my arm. It's a guy with a crew cut and short sleeves rolled up to show off his muscles.

"Want to dance?" he asks.

"No thanks."

He stares at me. "Really?"

"Really. I don't dance."

He walks away. Renée goes off to get us another beer and stops to talk to a dozen people on the way. I turn my attention back to the game of pool. Solids are winning. A moment later there's another tap on my arm.

"Why wouldn't you dance with my friend?" A tough-looking guy with greasy long brown hair is looking me up and down.

"I don't dance." I yell to be heard over the music.

"It's his birthday."

I shrug. "It's nothing personal."

Renée's back with our beers. She's found one of her friends sitting at a table with two guys. "Let's go sit with them."

I follow her through the crowds and up to a small, high table against the wall. There are four chairs and three people sitting there. One of them is Renée's friend Lisa, who introduces us both to the two guys, Steve and Scott. Renée slips into the empty chair, and I stand at the end of the table answering Lisa's questions about where I came from and what it's like to work at the toll booth.

A moment later Scott gets up and grabs an extra chair from the next table. He smiles as he sets it beside me. "I thought you might like to sit down," he says.

"Thank you!" It turns out that he didn't need to bother

because Renée leaves a minute later to go see another friend who just walked in, and I slip over into her empty seat. Lisa and Steve are chatting across the table, facing each other and shouting to carry on a conversation. Scott leans toward me and asks if I live in town.

I nod. “For the summer. How ‘bout you?”

“I live on the U.S. side, in International Falls. For the summer.”

“You’re American?”

“Yeah. Is that okay?”

I shrug. “Doesn’t matter.”

“I grew up in the Falls,” he continues, “and I came back to work for the summer. I live in Moorhead, next to Fargo. I go to school there.”

I nod and look around the bar. People are on the dance floor, playing pool, standing in groups, falling into each other. I can’t see Renée.

“You don’t look like you’re from around here,” Scott says. “How’d you end up in Fort Frances?”

I tell him about my dad, who’s willing to help pay for me to go to university. “So I came out here to live rent-free and work for the summer. Save up some cash. Some friends were on their way to Toronto, so I caught a ride.”

“I just met a couple people who were going to Toronto. Were your friends driving an old VW van?”

“Yes! Where’d you meet them?”

“I’m working at U.S. Customs for the summer. I was in the booth when they crossed.”

“You were their Customs officer? They told me about you. They said you were really cool.”

He smiles. “I am.”

“I bet you are.”

We’re joking, but I’m also serious. Maybe George had been overreacting a bit, but I know he had reason to worry. Everyone I’ve ever heard of crossing the border in a VW van has been hassled. But Scott didn’t stereotype or label them. Not in a bad way, anyway. That’s pretty awesome.

I lean in a little closer. “Did you say you were in school?”

He nods and tells me about Moorhead State University, where he’s about to enter his last year and graduate with a criminal justice degree. The only reason he chose that major, he says, is because that’s what Customs encouraged. He’s been an intern for the past three summers, and he’s been guaranteed a job on the northern border when he graduates.

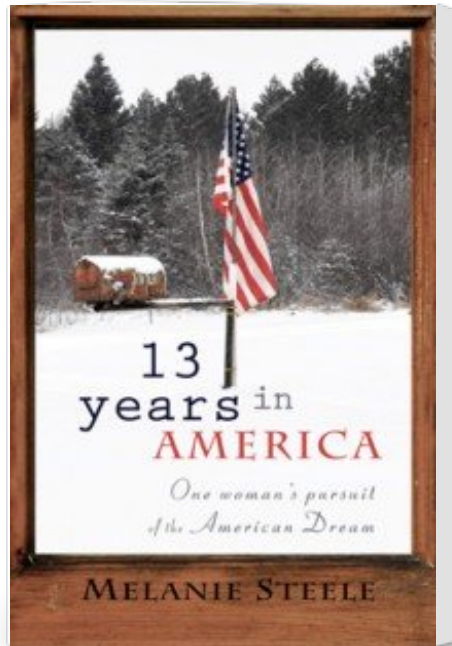
I tell him about graduating from high school three years ago and traveling around Canada for two years afterward, trying to find my passion and calling in life. Then, still searching, I moved in with some friends on Salt Spring Island.

“Where’s that?”

“It’s a little island off the West Coast, between Vancouver Island and the mainland. It’s where all the hippies went when the sixties were over. I lived with Sophie, the girl you met at the border, in her parents’ old house. There were five of us, and we each had to come up with a hundred bucks a month rent to cover the bills.” I laugh. It was such a good deal. I earned that, plus spending money, selling handmade necklaces at the Saturday craft and farmer’s market.

“Awesome.”

13 Years in America - One women's Pursuit of the American Dream



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