

Child Traveller

Marjorie M. Doyle

We'll save the cow money and go, my mother said.

We weren't farmers, but we kept two cows whose milk was worth cash. For years this money was faithfully stowed in an account marked "E," along with the baby bonus cheques. (Our mother ignored this Canadian endowment because we were anti-confederate.) Then, one Sunday afternoon in the spring of 1963, my brothers and I were summoned to a dining-room table cluttered with pictures of the Eiffel Tower, the crown jewels and the masterpieces of the Louvre. There were post cards of great cathedrals, Venetian gondolas, and paths that meandered along the Rhine and the Arno. There were a globe, foreign dictionaries and a weighty book of "Ancient and Modern Marvels." The time had come for our marathon trek through Europe.

I was ten, and hated it already.

There was no ambiguity in my mother's vision. A young widow and three kids, we would be fearless voyageurs, making our way in any town. Itineraries and reservations were dismissed as restrictive; tours and packages were for the less imaginative. We would tackle the great cities of Paris and Rome, navigating the streets with our maps and our wits. We would seek out the tiniest pueblos of Spain and knock on doors until we found a room for the night. We would shop in the markets, picnic by rivers, walk through the canvas of Monet's "Le Dejeuner sur l'Herbe." A life-changing cultural experience, my mother enthused, seeing before her a team of junior aesthetes. But I had already encountered the highest art: I'd seen a girl in grade six skip Double Dutch.

Child Traveller

We dressed to travel, lest somebody label us scruffy Newfoundlanders. Three seersucker dresses were folded into my suitcase, along with shoes with heels and a mysterious junior undergarment. (I might develop early and we wouldn't have the vocabulary to track down necessities in a foreign country.) Hats to wear in church were collapsed and jammed in, along with rollers, in case we couldn't find beauty parlours. My mother was glamorous and I, perhaps in rebellion, was a refractory tomboy. Traveling about in nylons and bonnets, I would be touring Europe in drag.

We boarded the S.S. Homeric at Montreal in early June. As we set out for the French port of Le Havre, most passengers stayed on deck, waving to family and friends. We four huddled together, my mother beaming. As the city's skyline began to fade, my last hopes went with it. For weeks I had tried to will myself into measles or mumps, appendicitis even; alas, I was in top form.

I was a kid not meant to travel. I wanted to be home at night with the Bobbsey Twins sneaking out of bed, opening the window and freezing myself for the pleasure of crawling back under the covers and reading more. By day, I was flat out. I had a two-gun holster. I made my own bows and whittled my own arrows for cowboys and Indians. I had a tiny Red Rose tea album in which I was busily pasting cards, like hockey cards, of birds I saw in the garden. I hitched a wagon behind my bike and kept a rigorous schedule delivering empty milk bottles to imaginary customers all over our eight-acre property. There were climbing spikes that needed to be nailed higher in the chestnut tree, and there were hours of pond swimming and boating to pack into the short Newfoundland summer. All this and more gone, as we left land behind.

Child Traveller

My brothers disappeared on the voyage, except for meals. They were considered old enough to hang out on their own, doing what I never knew. That left us with a crowd of men in Bermuda shorts and white shoes -- at home we called them mainlanders -- who scuffed along the deck with what looked like window poles from my school, pushing pucks. Dutifully, I endured shuffleboard so my mother would have company. The activities schedule moved us from the deck to the lounge for “compulsory” Italian lessons, which ended each day with an American couple, tipsy at 10:00 a.m., trying to squeak out Neapolitan songs. Every morning after the last doubtful notes of *Volare*, I was sent to youth prison, somewhere in the hold of the ship. This was meant to be a recreation program, but the fun eluded me. There’s a photo from the last day of the voyage, one of those “deals” in which an unctuous photographer snaps your picture “with no obligation” and then nags you into buying it for about US\$50. The Greek, Italian and Spanish kids might have been picked for this voyage for their beauty: olive skin, black eyes, glossy thick hair. They look as if they understand their cultures are superior, know their countries boast tombs and treasures sought by all travellers. They are proud and sure of themselves, like pillars of the Acropolis. With freckles, red hair, fake curls, and the wrong clothes, I look like I’ve been airlifted from a birthday party for dorks and dropped into a gathering of European children modeling designer play clothes. I’m scowling. In fact, of all the pictures taken that summer, there’s only one in which I don’t look like a hostage who’s lost hope. The photo was taken in a restaurant in Rome. We’d been escorted there by an Irish priest who wanted to spend the evening flirting with our

Child Traveller

good-looking mother. The others are smiling. I'm too busy to pose, tucked into the only familiar food that I saw in the whole three months: a steak.

My Newfoundland childhood had failed to prepare me for the challenges of European cuisine: *Wiener schnitzel, fondue, escargot, goulash, bortsch, viande sechee*. Even spaghetti was unrecognizable, the Italians surprisingly unfamiliar with the Newfoundland preparation. Breakfast – previously taken for granted – required a maturity I could not muster. There was an embargo on toast, it seemed. All that was on offer were buns so hard we called them bones, and long crusty loaves we'd caught sight of travelling through soot and diesel, sticking out of the backs of scooters. The day I broke down and cried for a real breakfast, my family took me seriously. My brothers pored over their pocket dictionaries and my mother – undaunted by language barriers -- drew upon her wiles, but to no avail. On the entire European continent there was not now – nor had there ever been – a bowl of Sugar Pops.

More foreign and intolerable than the food was the heat, generated by a blazing, merciless sun. Was the wind blowing fresh at home unable to reach across the ocean? No whiff of a breeze to move the heavy still air; just the noxious diesel fumes of trucks and trains. And crowds. Crowds meant competition for space; every venture onto and off a bus was a battle, and all “attractions” had queues. I developed a lifelong dread of line-ups. No pavilion, no play or musical, no opera or concert, *nothing* has tempted me since to queue -- except the time I lined up, not so much to see Bob Dylan, as to see Bob Dylan *in St. John's*.

Child Traveller

It wasn't long before *pensiones* lost their appeal. I wanted a hotel with an elevator and an elevator man; better still a motel with a pool. One of those nice Howard Johnsons, decorated all orange and blue and with a kid menu; somewhere you could get Chicken-in-a-Basket or Shirley Temple cocktails. But there were no hotels or motels on our journey – we scoffed at these, and sought out *garni* and inns. We scarcely saw the inside of a car, opting instead for buses, trams, trolleys, the Metro in Paris, the tube in London, funicular when necessary. We did take taxis in London after we saw *My Fair Lady* where Eliza Doolittle pulls up in front of Henry Higgins' house and says to the butler: "Tell 'm I come in a taxi." To be in London not driving around in those wonderful black cabs would be like boycotting gelato in Florence.

We travelled almost exclusively by train. With Eurail passes, we could hop on and off trains at will -- as much as a mother, three children and eight suitcases can be said to hop -- without advance notice or reservation. The perfect way to do Europe, unless you're 10 and wearing heels. My mother's idea was to travel on a budget, and see how the Europeans really lived. You would not find us in the dining cars with Hercule Poirot; we were ennobling ourselves on the railway platforms, grabbing hard rolls, strong cheese and warm flat *agua*. We never stopped long, trying to cover as much territory as we could during the life of the pass. It was a summer of countless hours spent in railway cars engaged in bitter conversations with a pet monkey I'd adopted from the Munich zoo. At ten, I was too old for an imaginary companion, but my girlhood was one of retarded development. (When I was 17, I was at a formal ball, waltzing closely with my date; I was lost in a reverie of delight over a practical joke I'd played earlier at school, when

Child Traveller

something wet and unpleasant occurred near my mouth. It took a few more bars of *Bridge over Troubled Water* for me to process my first kiss.)

I wasn't – or hadn't been -- a fearful child, but the journey became a string of tiny nightmares. In Ireland, I was hung out over the side of Blarney Castle an inch too far, a second too long, trying to plant my lips on that cold Irish bulls-eye. New horrors awaited in Paris when the platform quaked -- no, *we* quaked as the platform shook when we stood on the second level of the Eiffel Tower. (The fear of heights is still with me: a few years ago on a steep trail that climbs above the ocean on the west coast of Newfoundland, my companions were astonished when I fell to my knees, turned around and *crawled* back down.) At Madame Tussaud's wax works in London I burst into tears when I realized my brother had made me ask directions of an embalmed policeman.

And the trip went on. Was there no end to the sights to be seen? The Pieta, David, the Mona Lisa, Montmartre, Chartres, the Tower of London, the crown jewels. I trudged, begrudged and tramped my way through the lot of it. And at any one of these precious sites, I would have sold myself into slavery for a bowl of Frosted Flakes.

Exotica and adventure craved by tourists were incomprehensible to me. Why were we over there dying of the heat lining up to see boring things when we could be home playing cowboys and Indians and driving my "3?" (A tiny motorboat with a three horsepower engine.) From the moment we had left Torbay airport in June until we arrived back on Labour Day weekend, I was hot, tired, and dying of thirst. If there was a television set in all of Europe, we never saw it; yet there was no tomb, tower, or Baptistry door that could make up for three months without *Leave it to Beaver*.

Child Traveller

Our itinerary, unofficially, had a Catholic aspect. At home we were daily communicants and said the family rosary each night. Shortly into the trip, we abandoned these routines for practical reasons: four can't kneel in the squatty room of a pensione. As for mass, my mother had not recovered from finding herself in a Protestant church in London (her introduction to high Anglicanism). Yet we did keep our eye out for relevant sites, places like Castel Gandolfo, an extravagant summer camp for popes and Assisi where St. Francis let me down: I fell about a foot off a steep path and was saved only because my 13-year-old brother, whose usual reaction to fear on my part was to laugh, sensed real danger and dragged me back.

Coming to grief in holy places seemed part of it. At Lourdes, where the sick are made well, I became sick. The magnificent shrine in the south of France stood on the spot where the young Bernadette Soubirous had "seen" the Blessed Virgin; it was the site of cures for many who then left their wheelchairs, canes and crutches hanging around the church. We left nothing, but took away a spoon from the hotel so that my mother could continue to give me the medicine the French doctor had prescribed. (She mailed the spoon back from Ancona.) And in the Portuguese village of Fatima, I was ill again – ill at the thought of those heroic child martyrs being dipped in boiling oil by a Communist mayor eager for them to retract their sighting of the Virgin Mary.

On the voyage over, we'd received the news that Pope John XXIII had died. This was a setback. The only engagement we had for the entire three month journey was scheduled for the Vatican -- we were in possession of much coveted tickets for the beatification of a Redemptorist bishop. At ten, I took the news in my stride, although I knew my mother was keenly disappointed. Even my two brothers took it harder than one

might expect of teenage boys. But they were being groomed for the Redemptorist seminary; perhaps showing up there flashing stubs from a beatification would have the same cache as hockey tickets in a different environment. Now Rome would just be Rome, with no hoopla or privileges.

But we arrived in Rome to discover excitement: a covey of cardinals was hard at it in the Vatican, attempting to elect a new Pope. To catch out Pope-candidates and cardinals in such a pedestrian activity as an election was shattering to me. (At home in Newfoundland even the premier wasn't elected, or so I thought: Joey Smallwood was the head of state, as a matter of course, and had been since before I was born.) But here was an election being secretly conducted behind the facade of the great and mystifying Vatican! Holiness took a plunge.

We hung around St. Peter's Square, waiting, waiting, just a few hopeful tourists like ourselves, eyeing the sky for the puff of white smoke. (The ballots are burned after each

Child Traveller

vote, but when a clear winner emerges, some potion is put in the fire to make the smoke white.) The square was virtually empty, a peacefulness broken only by the odd nun scurrying across the courtyard, looking more ominous than the nuns at home. On the second day of our vigil, white smoke appeared. From behind pillars and inside doors, from all corners of the square, from walkways and ambulatories, people came. We were swarmed as eager Italians ran to get closer to be able to hear the cardinal who would appear in a distant balcony and announce the name. There were shouts of "Habemus Papa!" (We have a Pope) and suddenly we were swept under. I grabbed my brothers' hands and held tight. When the crush was over, our mother had vanished. We climbed

statues and peered out over the crowd, but it was hopeless; there were thousands of people in the square. Well trained, we swallowed our panic long enough to kneel at the appropriate moment as Pope Paul VI gave his first public blessing. We were kids but we knew the value of a plenary indulgence. But what should have been a moment in time, marked by a sense of history and holiness, found me instead hot as hell, and desperate for that elusive Coke. We ended up finding our mother by asking directions to a part of the Vatican where a Newfoundland Monsignor lived; she'd had the same thought.

And after Rome there was Venice, glorious Venice. We would travel the canals in water taxis and gondolas, me getting sick as we wended our way through the rotting garbage floating on both sides of us. And now, nearly forty years later, I go to wakes on the first day, before the flowers wilt, lest an olfactory madeleine transport me to the foul Venetian canals and make me sick. More troubles on the Adriatic when a plateful of fresh cherries -- confounding anyway as they bore no resemblance to the Avon filling --

Child Traveller

brought on a seasickness so visceral I can't listen to Verdi's *Otello* without feeling queasy in the opening scene.

And on we went, traipsing across the continent. In East Germany heavily armed soldiers boarded the train and checked our papers. We saw the Berlin Wall and its gatehouse which my mother passed through with her left arm held tightly to her side, hiding the traveller's cheques she feared might be taken from her. Brussels, Amsterdam, Nice, Seville, Milan, and through it all, nothing made an impression. In my mother's journal, if you crossed out all references to me and substituted another name, you would think the family was travelling with an invalid with special dietary needs who had to be

carted from place to place. In the entire three months, there is only one moment in which I seem to have perked up and taken note. It was in a souvenir shop in Rome where the customer ahead of us was a nun who bought 24 pairs of rosary beads. My mother's diary records: "Marjie amazed."