

ADVENTURE

ALL THE WAY HOME

I found myself in Austin, Texas

by Wendy Dennis
photograph by Chris Buck

I left for Austin, Texas, last September, on a splendid Saturday of the Labour Day weekend. Dawn was breaking as I headed west along the Queen Elizabeth Way toward the US border and a more expansive idea of myself. It was unclear what lay in store. I was just thrilled to be moving again.

This was my first trip to Austin, except for a few days the previous spring, when I'd flown down to see if it would be a good place to do some writing and take a sabbatical from my life. Among other things, I wanted to meet my prospective landlords, Cat and Norm Ballinger. I'd connected with them in March after posting an ad in the Austin section on Craigslist, indicating that I was a writer looking for an "apartment, house or idiosyncratic space."

Two hours later, a reply landed in my inbox. "Idiosyncratic is us," it read. "We have a furnished 1954 Spartan travel trailer in So. Austin (Travis Heights). Tree-filled 1-acre lot next to our 3-storey straw bale home. Can walk to #16 bus from here. Husb. is a poet/musician/carpenter. I am a retired artist/therapist. Call when you get to town and we can meet." I didn't know it then, but the scene and characters were quintessentially Austin.

The official reason I gave for going to Austin was to work on a book, but the unofficial reason was that I hoped to regain a sense of myself after a difficult period in my life. Beginning four years earlier, within the span of a year and a half, my mother died, my husband and I separated, and I had to move out of our family home. When I finally crawled out of the wreckage, I had no idea who I was, let alone where to go or what to do.

Losing my mother would have been painful under any circumstances—she had been my guiding light. But coming as her loss did, when the distances in my marriage had widened into oceanic gulfs, I was stranded in my grief. A ruined marriage is always cause for mourning, but when two people lose a rare *simpatico* as well as a shared life, the sorrow redoubles. My husband and I had been together for fourteen years when we separated, and, looking back, I think the marriage was probably destined to come to the place that it did. But the fact remains we had once been good together, good in a way that

you don't often see, good in a way that others remarked on. A friend once described our union as "the modern ideal, with *Seinfeldian* overtones"; we preferred to think of ourselves as *The Honeyymooners*.

There were flaws in the foundation, to be sure, but until it took a dark turn what I remember most about my marriage was how much fun we had. We were buddies in a flirty, high school sort of way. We laughed until we needed oxygen. We made adventures out of the most mundane tasks, like going to the video store together. For a time, our relationship was so intellectually engaged, nuanced in its understanding of one another, and brazen in its willingness to accept the darkest corners of each other's psyches, I doubt either of us will ever replicate it with another person.

But by the time it all unravelled, the atmosphere had turned toxic, and I would have sold my soul, or what was left of it, to be free. Still, whatever its ending, losing a love like that sent me spiralling into the void. When it was final-

couldn't afford to carry it, and my husband bought me out—I bade farewell not only to my home, but to a powerful idea of myself. Still, as traumatic as my leaving was, I doubt I'd have lasted there for long; by the end of our marriage, that stunning, airy space felt like a mausoleum, and I wandered through it like a character from *The Shining*.

For the next couple of years, I did what people do when they try to move on: found a new place, made plans, did my best to be optimistic. By most appearances, I was on my way, but in my heart I was only going through the motions.

Toronto became a particularly intense target for my ennui. I'd lived in the city my entire life, but suddenly its culture began to feel oppressive, and its preoccupations with media and money and real estate struck me as shallow and empty. The chattering classes chattered, and my eyes glazed over. I had no interest in competitive conversations or self-conscious affectations, and

of otherness, but not the burden of wrestling with another language. And I was fairly certain that I wanted to land somewhere in the West or South. I'd travelled there extensively and had always been drawn back. I considered Savannah, Georgia, and Albuquerque, New Mexico, two towns I'd visited, both with much to recommend them. But I'd never been to Austin and had always been intrigued by it; Austin seemed a place where I could feel at home. Besides, I had long been infatuated with the idea of knocking around in a vintage trailer, so when Cat replied to my Craigslist ad, resistance was more or less futile.

I first set eyes on the Spartan trailer when I flew down to Austin on my spring reconnaissance mission and met the Ballingers. Both were in their fifties: Cat was a slyly playful woman with hair that fell to her calves, and a wild, exuberant laugh; Norm, a gentle, easy-going man with a deeply intuitive aura about him.

The Spartan was a sleek silver Royal

I had no interest in the narcissistic obsessions of our age. I couldn't pick up the Style section of the *Globe and Mail* without profound feelings of revulsion.

ly over, I was so unhinged it was all I could do just to keep from going under.

I didn't even have the distraction of work; in the darkness, I couldn't find my voice. Nor did I have the elixir of my daughter's company. She had left for university when the tide in my marriage started to turn, and by the time she graduated and returned to live in Toronto for a time before moving to Los Angeles, she had her own complicated feelings about a mother who had gone missing; as a result, it was sometimes difficult for her to make herself available in the ways that I needed.

And then there was my home. Since the mid-'90s, my husband and I had lived in a loft in the Queen West neighbourhood, a spectacular space that, to me at least, symbolized who we were as a couple, and served as the perfect backdrop for the life I'd always dreamed of living—a sophisticated, downtown, bourgeois bohemian life. Losing that home had towering implications, less because it signalled my downward mobility than because it meant the death of a dream. When I moved out—I

little patience for the conspicuous consumption and narcissistic obsessions of our age that accosted me at every turn. I couldn't pick up the Style section of the *Globe and Mail* without profound feelings of revulsion.

No doubt my disenchantment was merely a projection on my part, having less to do with Toronto's perceived failings than with my own sense of stuckness, but I continued to feel dislocated and blank. Close friends provided solace; otherwise, I was at sea.

The only way I could imagine freeing myself was by disappearing for a while. Leaving, I hoped, would shift my focus, allow me to reconnect with myself, and put some distance between a past I had outgrown and a future I had yet to imagine. If what I hoped to discover was unclear, at least I knew what I didn't want: to live in a diminished way among the remnants of my former life.

And so the notion of a tabula rasa became an insistent refrain. Once I realized this much, I began to cast about for a destination. I knew it would be in America—I was looking for a sense

Mansion model made of vintage aluminum and eleven metres from end to end. Built in the fifties, like the Airstream, it had a flat roof, rounded curves, and a streamlined elegance, and it sloped diagonally at each end. It reminded me of a classic train compartment.

Prior to my taking up residence, a broad-shouldered, ridiculously good-looking young man named Paul had lived in the trailer. Paul was a fire juggler by profession. I later came to realize that this was a completely normal occupation for somebody who lived in Austin. Cat joked that she was going to miss him, since he used to fire-juggle bare chested in the backyard at night. I worried Paul might be a tough act to follow.

I am a deeply skeptical person. I don't believe in "signs." *The Secret* makes me want to puke. Nevertheless, when Cat answered my Craigslist ad it was hard not to believe that I'd expressed my desire to the universe and the universe had responded. After that, the mission took on a life of its own. Buoyed by clarity, I spent my days dealing with

I needed to get clear about some things, and the only way to do it was to drive 2,600 kilometres to a place where nobody knew my name.

the myriad chores of departure, divesting myself of my belongings, and preparing the rest for storage. I did this determinedly and, for the most part, un sentimentally. If I was going to cross the Rubicon, I had to travel light.

It's an intriguing psychological exercise, distilling one's life to its essence; each decision becomes a Rorschach test for the person that you were, and the person you hope to become. Since I was still a little hazy on the latter, I did occasionally have fits of angst—but my daughter's former boyfriend, who kindly offered to help me purge and pitch, kept me in line. "Don't keep anything you can't carry with you," he said. He was in his twenties and I was in my fifties, but the desire to be free is not age specific, and I found his observation strangely apt.

Looking back, it's interesting that I can no longer remember most of what I discarded. Certainly, I don't miss anything. What I do recall is feeling blissfully unencumbered with each trip to Goodwill. Occasionally, the full import of the uncertainty that lay ahead would surface from the deep, and I'd experience a sickening whoosh of fear. Most-

ly, though, I felt giddy and sure. In the end, my reason for going was simple: I needed to get clear about some things, and the only way to do so, it seemed, was to jettison my past, dismantle my present, and drive 2,600 kilometres to a place where nobody knew my name.

The only moment when I feared that the whole enterprise might end ignominiously was that first morning at the Detroit-Windsor border. Nothing about my intentions was illegal. Like thousands of snowbirds, I planned to spend six months visiting the US and didn't need a visa; nevertheless, I came prepared. I had letters from magazines for which I worked in Canada, proof of sufficient funds in the bank, travel insurance, and contacts in Austin. But nothing is certain at the border these days, and I had driven the four hours from Toronto feeling vaguely anxious about making the crossing.

I pulled up to the kiosk just as an agent entered the booth. She asked me the standard questions—where was I going, how long did I intend to stay—but when I told her my plans, I think my failure to give her a precise

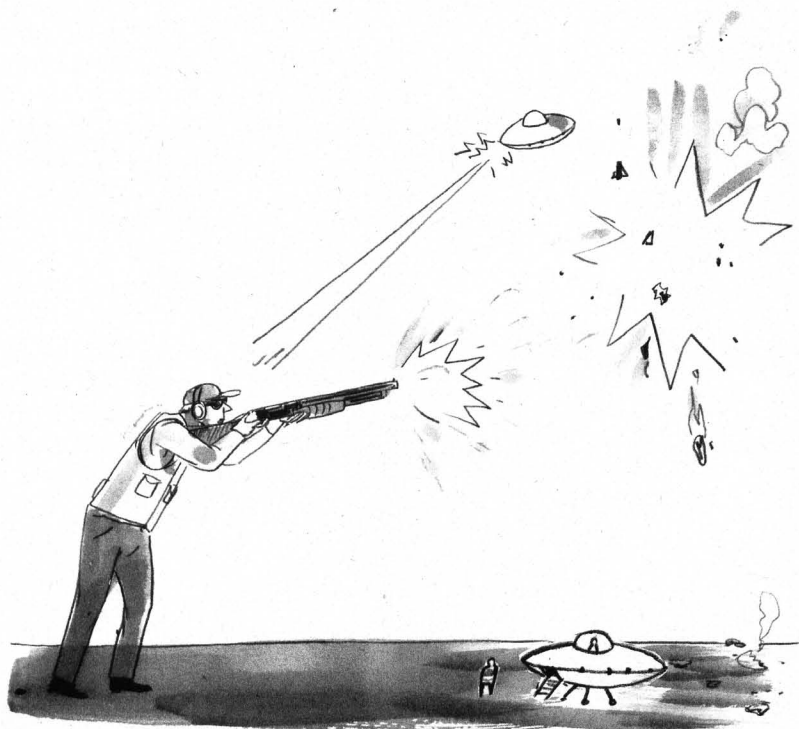
return date triggered suspicion. She ordered me to pop the trunk, step out of the car, and go inside for questioning. In a flash, agents swarmed my vehicle.

Inside, I calmly awaited my fate, but it occurred to me that despite my honest intentions, a real possibility existed that I might be denied entry. And if that turned out to be the case, I'd have no choice but to turn around and go home—a prospect so irredeemably fraught, it didn't even bear thinking about. Oh well, I thought, this is what you wanted, isn't it? *At least something is happening to you.*

Fortunately, a more level-headed officer inside reviewed my documents, and I was given the go-ahead. My heart was racing, but I strode casually back to my car, and then drove across the border, pulling over on the other side to call a friend and recount my ordeal. The tale told, I blew off my agitation, set my GPS, cranked up some Dylan, and got the hell out of Dodge. *How does it feel, to be on your own, with no direction home, like a complete unknown?* Well, Bob, it felt fucking fantastic, if you want to know the truth. It was the closest I'd come to feeling fully alive for a long, long time.

I had only the sketchiest idea about Austin when I decided to move there. I knew that it was a college town and a state capital, and that LBJ had famously proposed to Lady Bird there just after their first date, in the restaurant of the Driskill Hotel. I knew that it repeatedly turned up on those lists of the "Best Little Cities in America." I knew that it had a thriving music and arts scene and a world-renowned literary archive, and, by Toronto standards, a remarkably cheap cost of living. I knew that it lay deep in the heart of Larry McMurtry country, and that the summers were scorchingly hot. I knew, or at least I had a feeling, because I had fallen in love with the genteel openness of Westerners and Southerners before, that it was a warm, friendly, unpretentious place.

Only after I arrived did I gain a real sense of how it was Texan in all the ways you'd want it to be Texan, which



is to say you could find barbecue and cowboy boots and two-step dancing all over town, but it was also Texan with a hippie overlay—a paradox that struck me with particular ironic force the day I walked into Whole Foods Market and saw a No Firearms sign on the door.

Whole Foods began as a small natural foods store in Austin, and the mother ship is the size of a football field. The first time I visited, I spent two hours wandering the aisles staring slack jawed at the selections of pecans and pralines and chilies and smoked mesquite beef. Ranches are like vineyards in Texas, and the beef choices on display are enough to make a carnivore weep. But contradictions abound in Austin. The town is thick with herbalists and vegans and, anomalously for Texas, liberals: “a tiny blue dot in a red state,” as Norm put it. While the suburbs tend to be conservative, downtown, anti-Bush sentiment is everywhere. During my stay, I saw a doormat imprinted with the slogan “Give Bush the Boot,” spotted my all-time favourite bumper sticker—“Yeehaw is not a foreign policy”—and, with a war on and an election coming, observed a grassroots political engagement I had not seen since the '60s.

Still, like most American cities, Austin remains deeply segregated: the black and Latino populations live on the east

side of town and tend to stay there, except to work, a fact of life I never got used to. And yet, despite such endemic racial and socio-economic divides, there is no denying Austin's eclectic and fascinating collision of cultures. I saw the requisite number of stetsons and rednecks and pickup trucks, of course, but the city is also swarming with tattooed hipsters, artists, and cosmic cowboys strumming on the pavement. My latent hippie gene drew me to the part of town where the counter-culture reigned, and as a result I tended to see a particular slice of life in Austin; but in fact the place is a layered mix of University of Texas students and profs, high-tech workers (Dell, the computer company, is based just to the north), politicians, lobbyists, state employees, and blue- and white-collar workers.

The city prides itself on its “live and let live” attitude and willingness to embrace slackers and misfits, and nowhere is the town's desire to preserve its idiosyncratic sensibility more evident than in its unofficial motto: “Keep Austin Weird.” (Austin's eccentric, theory-expounding layabouts were memorably celebrated in *Slacker*, by resident filmmaker Richard Linklater, and it only took me a few days there to appreciate the movie's hilarious authenticity.)

There were so many colourful characters in Austin, sometimes the place looked like the backlot at Universal Studios. In Bouldin Creek, for instance, a funky neighbourhood off South Congress Avenue, everybody seemed to know and love Leslie, a fifty-something transvestite with great legs and a killer butt, who could often be seen in thong, tiara, pink feather boa, Bluetooth earpiece, and diva pumps, bent over a lawn and going at it with a weed whacker. Such quirks were deeply appealing, but I knew for certain I'd come to the right place when I heard a native say, “There are no metrosexuals in Austin.”

On the drive down, I was in the zone. I love road trips, but this was the longest I'd ever attempted alone, and I'd had a few anxious moments before setting out, partly because I'm directionally challenged and can barely find my way to Ikea. But the GPS turned out to be a real compadre, and, freed from worrying I'd wind up in Omaha, I sailed along. The real high, though, was the giddy recognition that whatever happened I'd taken a risk and followed my heart. I had the sense nothing could touch me. Not even the fact that I no longer had a home could shake my conviction that I was on the right track. The fear of having tumbled so far from my idea of home that I'd never recover had paralyzed me in Toronto; but released from the pressure of having to define myself in any particular way, I felt as if I were floating in zero gravity.

Whatever its flaws, so much about America still charms, and even though I was sad to see the vulnerability in its eyes, driving through the heartland made me glad. I cruised along, observing the locals in their natural habitat, listening to the crackpots on talk radio, revelling in the wonderful strangeness of it all. Mostly, I stayed on the interstates, but occasionally I'd pull off the highway to investigate something that interested me, like the time I approached Hope, Arkansas, and spotted a sign marking the childhood home of William Jefferson Clinton. At night, I'd check into cheap motels, savour the pleasures of anonymity, channel-surf with great fascination, and dance around the room like Tom Cruise doing his underwear dance in *Risky Business*.



I heard “Maggie’s Farm” wafting through the night air, and followed the music to a huge lawn where someone had mounted a large black and white poster of the young Dylan.

And then there was simply the sheer fun of confounding expectations and doing something so free spirited, so not grown-up. One afternoon, I checked into the Super 8 Motel in Texarkana and called my daughter. When she returned the call, she had no idea where she was phoning, until the receptionist drawled, “Sooper Ate Motelle, Texarrkaaana...” My daughter had been unreservedly supportive of my adventure, but when she discovered where I was bunking for the night, her first thought was, “Where the hell is my mother?” I knew how she felt, but I also knew I was in the right place, geographically and otherwise. After a long, dark sleep, I was a traveller in my own life again. I was certain she appreciated that, too.

Austin bills itself as the live music capital of the world, and more than anything else music is the heart and soul of the place. It seems to bubble up from the soil there, and the city so reveres its musicians that giant decorative guitars adorn the pavements, fiddlers play on street corners, and outdoor venues host bands all over town. You can hear stunningly accomplished

American roots music at all hours. I heard blues, country, rockabilly, gospel, rock ‘n’ roll, Western swing—and I barely scratched the surface of what the city has to offer musically. But it’s not just the incredibly rich music scene in Austin that is so affecting; it’s the way the joyful presence of music informs the culture as a whole.

One day, soon after I arrived, I was shopping in H-E-B, the local supermarket chain. John Lennon’s “Watching the Wheels” came on the loudspeaker, and suddenly everyone in my aisle was singing along, as if a conductor had silently raised his baton and given the signal for the musical to begin. I watched, transfixed, as the stock boy skipped merrily down the aisle singing, the black woman, her grocery cart teeming with kids, chimed in, and the tattooed hipster girl harmonized melodically. All I kept thinking was that this would never happen in Loblaws.

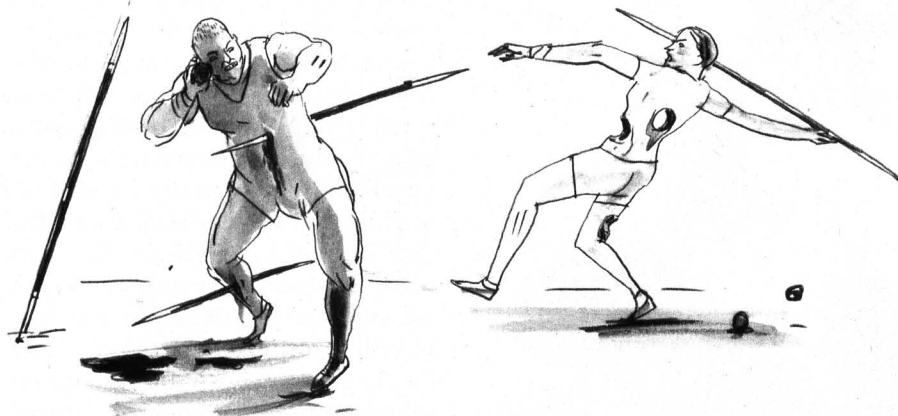
About a week later, I attended the three-day Austin City Limits festival in Zilker Park. Dylan closed the show, and after his performance I slung my folding chair over my shoulder and made my way back to my car through a love-

ly neighbourhood with large, rambling lawns, and gracious houses set back from the street. It was a warm, fragrant evening, and I was floating on Dylan fumes, having also seen him onstage the night before in the outdoor amphitheatre of Stubb’s Bar-B-Q, a venue that held 2,200 and was so intimate it could have been someone’s backyard.

As I walked, I heard “Maggie’s Farm” wafting through the night air, and followed the music to a huge lawn where someone had mounted a large black and white poster of the young Dylan, a skinny angel from his “Blowin’ in the Wind” days. A light shone on the poster so Dylan’s image glowed radiantly in the night; in the background, his electrifying voice reverberated heavenward. The scene was deeply moving, and I stopped to take it in. Other concert-goers joined me, and we lingered there, gazing and listening in reverential silence. After a while, without saying a word, people dispersed, the music still echoing behind us.

At such moments, it was hard not to fall in love with Austin. And there were many such moments. All I had to do was follow the music. One night, I went to hear a band I loved at a local bar called Jovita’s. I almost never go to bars to hear live music in Toronto; few have an atmosphere I’d enjoy. But in Austin, the bars I encountered were unassuming, laid-back places, and welcoming to people of all ages. It’s not the promise of a scene that draws people to them; it’s the shared love of music. As a result, I felt perfectly comfortable on my own.

The joint was jumping at Jovita’s that night, as always, and I sat near the dance floor like a regular, tapping my foot to the rollicking strains of Western swing. Soon, a roguish charmer of a cowboy insisted on two-stepping me around the dance floor all night, while I tripped over my feet and beamed like an overjoyed kid. Some time later, my daughter came to visit. She wasn’t in the door of the Continental Club fifteen seconds before a tall drink of water in a stetson, string tie, and singularly cool red Western shirt grabbed her



by the hand and began throwing her around the dance floor. I don't think she sat out a dance for four days. "I feel like a woman in this town," she said. I just smiled knowingly.

When I think about the time I spent in Austin and what it meant to me, it was the music more than anything that gave me back myself. Simply spending time in a place where people burst spontaneously into song, and build shrines to Bob Dylan, and ask you to dance because there's music playing—and what else would you do when there's music playing?—reminded me of what mattered in life, or at least what mattered to me. That was a gift, and I kept it in a safe place and never took it lightly.

The trailer turned out to be a surprisingly comfortable place to hang out. It was a stone's throw from the adobe-like straw bale house Norm had built. The Ballingers were warm and hospitable without being intrusive. We had little in common in terms of background and lifestyle, but none of that mattered. They welcomed me into their world, and the more time I spent there the more I realized how irrelevant were many of my own preoccupations. Their property was only ten or fifteen minutes by car from anywhere you might want to be in Austin, but it was set back from the street, and most days I heard only birdsong and the romantic rumble of passing trains.

Inside, the trailer had a spacious feel, with high ceilings and plenty of light. Once I'd outfitted it with a desk and chair, it had everything I needed, including wireless Internet, a porch for barbecuing, AC, and a rabbit-eared TV. I came to think of it as the Texas version of a cottage. (As for the paint job, I'd have preferred Benjamin Moore's Cloud White, but Cat's tastes leaned more toward hippie turquoise.) It was the perfect place to write. But even when I wasn't working, I spent a good deal of my time in Austin alone. I enjoyed companionship when I had the chance to receive it, but I didn't feel the need to seek it out. I was grateful for the opportunity my writing afforded me to enjoy a renewed acquaintance with myself.

I was working on a project I'd begun some years before and had put in a

drawer, a darkly comic novel about marriage and middle age. One of the reasons I'd been keen to leave Toronto was because the story had been calling to me again, and I wanted to see if I could buy the time to find out where it might lead. I'd worried that it might be hard to mine such material, but from a distance my imagination was free to roam, and exploring that landscape in a comic vein turned out to be deeply pleasurable.

I cannot overstate how happy it made me to see the absurdity in life again. Black humour has always been my salve against the darkness, and it was through that lens that my husband and I once navigated the world. When we split up, I honestly believed that I would never laugh again. Certainly, I doubted that I would ever cause laughter again. But there I was, sitting in a trailer in Austin, channelling my suffering into a story, and the story was entertaining me, and I could finally see its ending, and I knew I was going to be okay. Whatever had gone down, the past no longer had any power over me. It was all just material now, and the only thing I cared about was getting it right. Whether I finished the book and whether it was ever published were less important than the fact that I was weeping with laughter again. That was when I knew I was cured.

On New Year's Eve, the Ballingers threw a party. Among the guests were an artist, a poet, an academic, a playwright, a lawyer, a musician, and a calligrapher who also played the lute and fiddle. At one point, a few of us went outside and were warming ourselves by the heat of the chiminea. When Rick, the lawyer/record collector, discovered that I was Canadian, he proudly announced that he had a collection of Stompin' Tom Connors records he'd had to track down on the Internet, as they weren't available in the US. Emily, his playwright wife, added that they'd even checked a map to see if there actually was a place called Tuktoyaktuk. Then Russell, the musician, informed me that he'd been married to a French-Canadian woman and for many years had lived in Quebec City. He missed Canada, and asked after Knowlton Nash.

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Lone Star State on a New Year's Eve and talking with Texans about Stompin' Tom Connors and Knowlton Nash was, to say the least, surreal. Ordinarily, other than as the butt of occasional jokes on *The Simpsons* or *Family Guy*, the only time I'd ever heard my country mentioned in America was on local weathercasts when the temperature plummeted and everyone blamed "a cold front coming down from Canada." It was bracing to hear these outside perspectives, especially since for most of my life I had found it difficult to identify with the idea of Canadian-ness at all. If anything, I'd felt a much stronger sense of identification with certain American values and sensibilities.

To my great surprise, this shifted in Austin. Sometimes what prompted my sense of belonging to another place was something as simple as having to pull out my Visa card when I visited a doctor, and finding the idea deeply foreign. Sometimes it happened when the two worlds were thrown into high relief. Shortly before I left home, for instance, the national outpouring of elation in the wake of Steven Truscott's acquittal was much in the news. On the drive down, I heard a public radio story about a Texas case in which a young man who'd failed to prevent a murder as a teenager had been sentenced to death for the crime. His sentence was commuted to life in prison, but what caught my attention was the Austin lawyer discussing the case, who observed, "One should never underestimate the taste for the death penalty in Texas." At such moments, I came to appreciate the place I was from.

After New Year's, I started thinking about going home. I didn't have to leave the US until late February, but aside from the fact that I was heading into the teeth of the most brutal Southern Ontario winter in years, I was looking forward to returning. I knew I'd face familiar pressures and problems, but I felt up to the task now. Objectively, nothing had changed; in every other way, there'd been a seismic shift. Something had recalibrated internally. For one thing, I felt as if I'd put an ocean between my past and me. For another, I didn't expect to find in Toronto what I had in Austin, but I didn't care. I had what I needed, and could carry it with me.

When I thought about going back, mostly I thought about making a real home again, having the opportunity to do satisfying, decently remunerated work, and reconnecting with my friends and family. I knew the benefits of intimate relationships, of having a mate you loved, but I didn't have any specific interest in finding one. Maybe this would change and maybe not, but it wasn't something I thought about at all.

Some people found this hard to understand—and even now I am asked the question a lot. Sometimes what I want is simply assumed. At a gathering shortly before I left town, a woman bade me farewell by saying, "I hope you find a guy." I have no doubt that her intentions were caring and she believed that that was what my life was missing, but I found her words strangely beside the point. I didn't go to Austin to find a guy; that wasn't even on my radar. I went to Austin to write and to find an old friend. Against considerable odds, I had found her. That accomplished, I was simply looking forward to hanging out with her for a while.

I made it home in two and a half days. I crossed the Delta and the Mississippi, and headed up through Kentucky and the Midwest, and then I was in Michigan. The sky was blue and sunny, and the roads were clear the whole way.

I crossed the border at Port Huron. When I pulled up and saw the Canada sign, my heart fluttered. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before. The depth of my feelings took me completely by surprise.

It was around ten on Sunday morning, and the border crossing was nearly deserted. I drove up to one of the kiosks and handed over my passport. The agent looked it over.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Toronto."

"How long have you been away?"

"Five months."

"Where have you been?"

"Austin."

"What were you doing there?"

"I'm a writer. I was doing some writing."

He handed back my passport and waved me on. "Lucky you," he said.

"You have no idea," I replied.

And then I smiled and headed home. ➔