

BORDER TOWNS AND BATHROOMS

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First Place, Creative Non-Fiction

IT WAS LATE July in Arizona. The time of year when the heat can kick your ass, murder the children, and melt your car to a whimpering pool of metal. You think I'm kidding, but seriously, every summer people leave toddlers in their cars, even inside their garages, and the kids don't wake up from naps like that. If what's-her-face who drove her kids into that lake had just moved here first, she never would have gone to jail. But don't get me started.

Late July. When you've been here a few years, if you haven't packed up and moved back to Seattle or Minnesota after that first summer, you can enjoy 100 degree weather. But by 116 degrees, you need to leave town. And the state, the whole damn country, you don't care, just as long as you can get out of this HEAT. And seven weeks cooped up with two pre-schoolers just makes it worse.

Luckily for me, I had a friend. A friend with a beach house in Rocky Point, Mexico, only a four hour drive away. But I couldn't decide to go.

I'd heard the stories. The fake rear-endings. The women who disappear. The drug-running, alien-smuggling, border-crossing horror tales. There's no way I was taking my little gringa butt down there, not with two children in tow. But then she'd called me from the beach, singing tales of Margaritaville, shrimp cocktails, and cool breezes. Below the belt stuff like that.

It took an entire morning of shopping and I had to triple check the paperwork: car registration (current), birth certificates (yes, they're definitely my spawn), money (enough but not too much), driver's license, and of course the insurance, which isn't even good there, but you've gotta have it to buy the insurance you need. We'd have to stop in Ajo.

After lunch, I stuff suitcases, toys, groceries, books, videos, water bottles and snacks into my trusty old Saturn trying to lay things out so I can reach and disperse the important things with one hand. Looking good. We're in the car, we're loaded, we pull out, we're on the road!

Only twenty minutes out, heading southwest on the Maricopa freeway, and the road melts into mercury, liquid silver pooling as far as the eye can see.

Civilization fades away. Well, it wasn't that long ago that what I'm fatuously calling civilization was pecan groves and cotton fields and not long before that it was Hohokam land. Or Gila. We pass through the reservation, now with a major stoplight and tacky casino. It's all so close, we've hardly made a dent in the time but there are horses and farm fields stretching out to the foothills.

The driving's easy: at every juncture, turn right. I'm going at least 82, scanning for big trucks and speed traps, but lets face it, a young white woman with two bouncing children's heads in the back seat is not much of a profile. All those years of being terrified of going anywhere alone, just because I'm a woman, and I finally get to *dodge* fear because of these ovaries. I refuse to feel guilty; and step on the gas.

“Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear.” No kidding. But for the first time, I see the road, long, plain, gorgeous road, with yellow dashes like ellipses down the middle. The same damn thing in front of me and in the rearview mirror. Every way I look. In this lull, no children, no me, with wrinkles or weight or zits or a bad hair cut. Just road. God. I catch glimpses of geckos or rats (I don’t look too closely, I’m cruising) scurrying back to their rocks and shadows as things fall away.

At Gila Bend, I full stop and turn left, South on the 85, and the sign says Mexico. It’s a one-lane hour to Ajo. That means I have to pull into the oncoming traffic lane to pass slow-moving campers and rattly trucks. I don’t know that I’ve ever done this myself, I usually drive in cities and suburbs, cruising to pre-school and on a particularly racy day, downtown. Somebody else always drives the windy one-laners. I don’t know if I’m even really allowed to pass other cars, with my babies drifting off in the back seat - and I have never wanted a minivan more, than when they were yammering back there, right in my ear, like it’s personal—but the road is long and clear and this truck is going maybe 60 so I downshift, pull over and out, step on the gas, and I’ve got it, the car revs under me and pulls, I can feel it, and I’m back in my lane, my face is flushed, my pulse is racing but I’ve done it! I kick minivan ass! I’m getting cocky, looking for cars to pass, but soon enough start seeing Border Patrol vans, so cool off a bit.

I try to take in everything. Driving is easy when there is no one around—kind of like mothering—and although I periodically flash scenes of chaos and crushed metal on the inner mind’s eye, just in case I’m forgetting I’m going almost 90 here, I try to focus on the real. The mountains, probably foothills to most people, but luscious shades of purple, indigo, and finely shaped, like curved brackets, summing up the horizon in a pattern of runic shapes I can almost interpret, but not quite.

And the cactuses, the sahauro, giant dildos of the desert, posted everywhere. Or maybe my husband’s just been out of town too long...but they *are* funny, pointing and waving, entwined with mesquite, and the ocotillo, desert lace, a filigree on the glowing landscape. More sky than I know what to do with, and more silence.

Through the black canyon rocks, dragon shaped hillocks, and I’m coming into Ajo, a dusty mining town, who’s main industry must be selling Mexican auto insurance, the signs are everywhere. And of course, the kids are still sleeping but this is the main bathroom break, so I turn some music on quietly as the speed limit signs pull me back into society, 65, 55, 45, and I’m crawling, 35 and I can’t hardly stand it, but up ahead I see the Texaco that has clean bathrooms, snacks, and, of course, insurance policies. By the time I’ve filled the tank, they’re awake if disoriented, and we all get out to stretch.

Bathrooms. You can’t have a road trip without bathrooms. And there’s nothing quite like fitting you and two kids into one stall, because how else do you keep your eyes on these guys? And the signs were true, more or less, I’ve seen plenty worse bathrooms. I generally try not to extend my powers of control to bladders and bowels, but this is the only stop until the beach. I have to bet them candy bars that they can use the toilets—that’ll show up in counseling—but we get the job done.

I've tried to calmly stash all the valuables (all three of them, and that's being generous) and lock all the doors without them noticing. I know that a single woman with two young kids might as well have "kick me, rob me, steal my car" taped to her back, but the kids don't need to know that. And the fact is, everyone is nice. Maybe it's the day, the drive, the town—the woman in uniform talking to the woman behind the counter about her brother on the reservation, the old guy behind the counter who speaks more Spanish than English and probably owns the place, the surfer-dude type who fills out the insurance forms—but I'm out of my cocoon and plan on staying out for awhile.

Belted back in, and the road winds us through tree-lined streets of old mining company homes, past the stark white church, over railroad tracks and out of town. Next stop, the border. I've turned off the stereo, shushed the kids. What is it about borders? The young men with guns, the dogs, the concrete marker that this is not your world, these are not your rules. Of course, it hasn't been my world since Gila Bend.

We get the green light and I drive into Mexico.

"Children, we are in Mexico. Or should I say, 'Bienvenida a Mexico?'" I announce. They are hushed, as if I have accomplished some amazing thing. We talk—well, I lecture—about different languages, different rules. And how they'd damn well better not yammer too much back there and mess with my driving because I don't speak Spanish and if we get pulled over we are way busted. I pass back some snacks and try to navigate my foreign (now) car through the border town of Sonoita.

"It looks different," states Emilie. She's right, it does. And for all the old washers in front of small stucco places, for all the scraggly bouganvilla, it's more to look at than my pink stucco, nazi-homeowner associated subdivision. There are brick patterns and unexpected flowers, a fountain. The kids are back to their games before I reach the dog-leg junction, all the while dodging the cars that back up into the street from the mercados and farmacias and bars all along the road. Speed bumps, "Alto" signs (luckily on a familiar red octagon), mongrel dogs—I'm cruising through this. I am on the other side. I could be a chick in a western, dashing through the wild Arizona to the border, hiding out in Pancho's villa while I wait for the trail to cool. Hey Louis, hey Zane, I'm here, guys, *and* I brought the kids.

And then I see a woman, waiting to cross the street. I don't know her at all, but I know her intimately. She's me. With darker hair, darker skin, a toddler in a stroller and the big sister twirling behind, probably singing. She's got one hand on the rickety stroller, one hand waving her dancing daughter forward, to hurry and keep up, how I know that feeling. I am past her before I can sketch a wave. But I realize I am not a lone woman herding my charges through some unknown, hostile territory. It's like I've got a passport to some secret organization that's taken over the planet, I'd just never noticed. We don't have to speak the same language, we don't worry too much about the drug sniffing dogs at the border, the NAFTA Treaty, the politics of separation. We haul babies, hold hands, make little people. Into big people.

“Are we there yet?” “Where’s the beach?” “Yeah, I don’t see the water.” “Mom, who’s honking?”

I’ve still got a ways to go. I concentrate. I throw the last crumbs from the snack bags and the last water bottles back to the ravenous horde to buy some silence as I bounce my way over wet-dirt streets, counting turn-offs until I get to what I think, I hope, is the right one.

It is, and I have arrived. We all have. We pile out to be greeted by her note, she’s at the beach. We run down the path and over sand dunes, out to the ocean, the edge of the world.

“Take off your shoes!” I may as well be yelling to the wind. They tumble over the earth and into the sea and I follow, sinking my toes into the wet glurp of sand, letting the gentle waves lick up my knees. The air is a cool caress, a balm. The pelicans glide overhead in sentried rows, rippling like ribbons, then hurl themselves with murderous abandon into the sea.

And I can’t remember if I locked my doors. But it can wait.

