



# 3

*Camping out on a zoo-hopping trip—note the flip-flops*

## Road Kill

I did not arrive in Africa until I was 30, but my journey started long before then. As a youngster, I longed for the tough and the untamed. I didn't care for dolls. I was, instead, a strange little girl who played strange games, amusements that came from places in my mind that I could not fathom. Although generally well-behaved, I had bizarre compulsions to experience the outdoors and did so clandestinely when I suspected that it was a no-no, and openly otherwise.

When I was five, we lived on a farm across from a cranberry bog near South Carver, Massachusetts. One day my mother, who had already noted my distaste of indoor confinement, found me in the woods, stuffing mushrooms into my mouth. I refused to spit them out. Instead—I'd show her—I swallowed. Mom rushed me into the house, called the hospital, and followed their instructions. To induce vomiting, she made me drink heavily salted water followed by a mustard solution. Her report: the kid drank it all, glared furiously at her, and still refused to give up the mushrooms. When grilled, I admitted that I'd been consuming them for days. Finally, she relented, thinking, "All



*Mom's introduction to trouble*

right, you little sneak”—perhaps that wasn’t the exact phrase—“you haven’t died yet.” I’m sure it stands out in her memory, but I don’t remember the details of that particular episode. In truth, I had sampled odd foods from the time I could walk. (I also stole snacks from the fifty-pound bag of dog food stored on the porch.)<sup>13</sup>

When I was seven, we moved to Waco, Texas. We were an Air Force family and mobility came with father’s uniform. Where before there were the lush woods in which I wandered at will, picking and pruning and gleaning the blueberry bushes like a wild creature, now it was rows and rows of boring, sun-baked suburbia. Here and there were precious strips of fallow, but the only wildlife they held were giant red ants and the horned toads that ate them.



*My pal Pepi*

Lacking untamed spaces—and perhaps rationalizing that it was my birthright—I began my career of childhood mischief. I persistently raided the neighbors’ fruit trees and wild plants, pretending that I was a deer browsing through, fattening myself for the coming winter. I was never apprehended,

possibly because much of the fruit was left to rot anyway and possibly because I always took along my mongrel dog Pepi, who was really a “wolf” and loyal protector. From day to day, escapade to escapade, I was a feral creature, a Cro-Magnon, a trailblazer, an

Australian aborigine, thriving by wits alone. There were no other people in my world, no buildings, no cars, no electricity. There was just nature and me.



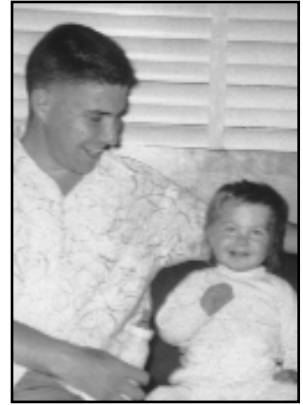
*Winter in Waco*

I became the ringleader of a group of adventuresome friends. We raided squirrels’ nests, explored mossy drainage culverts under the streets, fished in rain puddles with bent safety pins, and cut open dead animals to see what was inside. In winter, during a rare Waco snowstorm, I built an “igloo” and pretended to be an Eskimo. I imagined killing seals, being pulled by huskies, and wondered what blubber would taste like. I pondered the

<sup>13</sup> I quit eating the crunchy stuff when I found unidentifiable short brown hairs in the kibble.

rigors of glacial temperatures and whether I could survive wearing ten shirts, ten pairs of pants, and ten pairs of woolly socks.

Then, pursuing my father's graduate school dreams, the family moved again. This time it was to 25 acres of undeveloped scrub south of Austin. There we lived for months in a shell of a condemned house that my dad purchased cheap at auction. It had been sawed into three pieces, moved to our property, and nailed back roughly together. While the well was being dug, we had no water and the north wind whistled through a building with no heat. This rurality was my delight and I could hardly be forced inside. I made a pact with the family that all my chores would be outdoors, which would excuse me from housebound duties.



*Clowning around with dad*

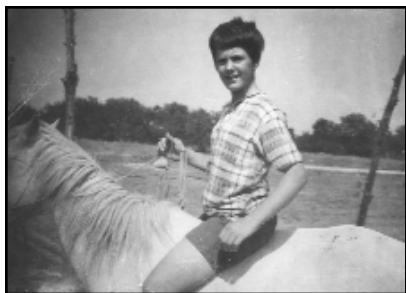
Despite a dearth of edible plants, I continued to eat and taste wild foods and became, at least in my own mind, a wildcrafter. I chewed on mesquite beans, tried cooking cactus pads, chased armadillos, and hollowed out a den at the base of a sprawling cedar. I dined on mistletoe berries for years and then read somewhere that they were poisonous. I reasoned that the books were wrong because birds ate the sticky, translucent things. Surely they were edible, just as they were meant to be glued by bird beaks to branches for spawning fresh parasitic plants—if they were good enough for birds, they were good enough for me.

A few months after we moved to the ramshackle place, I was given two horses that the owner had no use for and didn't want to feed. (She felt sorry for me because I had joined the pony club but had no horse to ride.) One was a 28-year-old, broken-down Thoroughbred, the other a blue-eyed white pony mare. The gelding's name was "Biggie," an ill-tempered, shaggy, sway-backed beast whose bony withers towered above my head. The pony was a half-wild creature that had never been trained properly. Because my father had left the military to return to school, we were poor, and with six kids, always on a tight budget. The family had little money to care for horses properly or to buy grain, a saddle, or even a decent fence. None of this mattered. I was determined to make it work.

My parents bought enough wire to construct a triangular pen anchored by three cedars where the animals could be kept, with ten

bales of hay as my Christmas present. On weekends, I rode a half-mile to the main road whose shoulders presented a lush crop of weedy Johnson grass. There, cutting my fingers until they bled on the serrated blades, I pulled grass by hand, tied it into bundles and hauled it home. No sacrifice was too great. Every morning I arose at

5:30 to care for my beasts before school. Those were the best years of my childhood.



*Rope bridle on pony mare*

Horses set me free. I fashioned rope bridles and rode bareback. I became an explorer and rediscovered America. As a rancher, I scoured the range searching for lost steers. I was a hungry Indian scouting for bison. I stood on my steeds' backs to steal the out-of-reach peaches and plums within a ten-mile radius. I imagined

what it would be like to take a cayuse and follow the railroad right-of-way across America. I'd read about the Pan-American Highway and wondered if I could actually take a road all the way to Tierra del Fuego.

When we lived on the farm, we had no money to take animals to the vet. Our great Dane halfbreed called Rastus once cut his neck, and the wound gaped a finger's width. It looked clean and fresh, so I threaded a large sewing needle with dental floss and stitched the gap closed. I didn't realize how tough dog skin was, but Rastus held still while I pierced his hide and closed the injury. Three days later it was still sealed shut, and in a week I snipped the threads with scissors. I was thrilled that my "operation" had been successful. Not only was I an explorer, I was a surgeon, too.

I gave my first injection when I was about thirteen. I had a borrowed horse named Cookie, who seriously injured her hind fetlock. The veterinarian recommended antibiotics to prevent infection. The vet gave the syringe and medicine to the owner, but she decided it was too far to come to administer the drug herself and that I could do the job instead. The syringe was huge, the needle looked wicked, and I just knew I would not be skillful enough to make it painless. I only had my little sisters and brothers to help, and I knew that they were not enthusiastic about horse holding. I was scared. Big time. I tossed and turned the night before the procedure, thinking of the million ways the injection could go wrong (the needle

would break off inside, the stuff would squirt out backwards, some air would get in accidentally, I would be trampled by the furious Cookie—the imagination supplied an endless list of calamities). Early the next morning I crept downstairs, drew up the medicine as I had been taught, and slipped out of the house.

The palomino was lying down in the corral, and being a gentle soul, did not stir. With trepidation and the weighty syringe behind my back, I approached her. I gritted my teeth; this was the moment of truth. I cooed to Cookie in my best bedside manner while seeing a sure movement in my mind's eye. I smacked her neck as I had been shown: One! Two! Three! Slap! In went the needle. Cookie shuddered as if being bitten by a horsefly, but I was already finished, and I yanked out the needle.

I heaved a huge sigh of relief afterwards. It was a small lesson in self-confidence for a teenager, and I learned to be bold with treatments. I finished Cookie's course of antibiotics over the next two weeks. (Unfortunately, the horse never regained the use of her leg. She was found to have a bad tear into the fetlock joint and, instead of surgery, the owners had her put down.)

Three years later, degree in hand, my dad was offered a university professorship. Again, we moved. With sadness, I found other homes for the dogs, cats, assorted livestock, and my ornery Biggie. I sold my pony mare, pregnant and with foal at side, for a hundred dollars. This time our new home was in a mining district strung with hamlets that nestled in the shadows between the sun-blocking hills of southwestern Pennsylvania. It was a depressed area populated by out-of-work coal-miners and steelworkers. In the first week, we went looking for a place to rent. It was a clammy morning—rainy in the dips and foggy on the ridges. Taking the torturous road through Sweet



*California, Pennsylvania*

Hollow, we arrived in Daisytown, an old coal company town, nearly abandoned at the bottom of a ravine. It was straight out of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Certainly, Daisytown did not live up to its name.

We busted in California, Pennsylvania,<sup>14</sup> home of California State College (now California University of Pennsylvania) where my father

<sup>14</sup> As in "California, or Bust," from the 1849 California gold rush.

taught. This was no place for horses. Living in a town, and with an unfenced yard, even a dog was problematic. So I found a substitute:

reptiles. I became a passionate amateur herpetologist and kept dozens of snakes, lizards, and feed-mice in the family dining room. I housed them in aquariums, cages, boxes, and one glass-fronted closet, generously given to me for “the critters.” Although still in high school, I audited university courses on botany, herpetology, and entomology.



*Amateur herpetologist*

I wandered the town, stripping fruit from trees bowed down with the season—dozens of varieties of apples, pears, and cherries, along with raspberries, blackberries, and grapes. Pennsylvania honed my interest in survival skills. Where Texas had little wild provender, Pennsylvania made up for it in an abundant

array of edible foods on the green slopes surrounding the town. I ate fiddlehead ferns, dandelion buds, lambs-quarters, Indian cucumber-root, and made salt by scorching colt’s foot leaves.

“Pretend you’re in the bush,” I told my family and served cottontail rabbit (found dead on the road that morning), miniature wild strawberries, and cattail-pith salad. As they picked at the food, the single comment came from my baby sister. “Mommy, if I die, please don’t let her cut me up like she did the poor bunny.”

Science became the new challenge. I loved to cut up dead things. Being elbow-deep in smelly carcass gore didn’t bother me because there were so many interesting things to see. My fascination even extended to feline family members. Our cat was run over by a car in the alley behind our house. The shock of seeing the dead pet was instantly sobering, but the fact that the cat was still warm gave me an inspiration. I had never peered inside such a fresh body before. I carried the cat carcass downstairs into the coal cellar. There, on a rough wooden table, I zipped him open. The intestines spilled out, still writhing in peristalsis. I had never seen that before—a dead animal with parts still *moving*. Excited, I ran upstairs to find someone to share my discovery with.

“Quick, quick, come see what I found,” I shouted to Ivri, my younger sister.

“What?” she asked.

“Never mind,” I responded. “You gotta see. It’s too cool to explain.”

We trooped downstairs to the basement where our laid-out cat splayed belly-up in red-splashed glory. I'll hand it to my sister; she only blanched as I poked at the mobile gut. She was furious with me—not for the showing, but for not telling her that the cat had been run over. Ivri never truly forgave me for the dead-cat affair—but it was she who went on to become a physician.

In high school, I was the biology teacher's pet. I kept an iguana and various other animals in his classroom. Rebellious and devious, I was nearly expelled for carrying a live boa constrictor around my neck in the halls. (It was a prop in the senior class play, *You Can't Take It With You*, and super for my peer image.) I deliberately taunted my right-wing homeroom teacher by refusing to stand for the school's morning prayer. For his racist regard, I created a "Black Heroes" bulletin board just a few steps from his classroom door. I played loose with school rules but never came close to flaunting fundamental taboos like—horrors!—playing hooky, smoking, or drinking. It was difficult for the "office" to deal harshly with me; grade-wise, I was in top form.

My last uplifted finger to academic authority was when I refused to go to my graduation. Apparently, never in the school's history had a student perpetrated such an insult. Finishing high school was a high point in the lives of most of the students who hoped to get jobs, settle down, and raise families. The administration said that without going to the ceremony, I would not graduate. To intimidate me, they called in legal counsel. The lawyer informed the astonished principal that the student was correct, and the diploma belonged to her. Physical presence at the ceremony was not a requirement for graduation. A gold-bordered piece of paper with fancy calligraphy arrived in the mail. It held little meaning for me. High school was merely a low hurdle on the way to adulthood. I was determined to stalk bigger game.

I enrolled at Wichita State University, where I lived with my grandmother and helped her with housework and errands in exchange for room and board. Fortunately, she lived in the middle of an old wheatfield bordered by a Kansas windbreak of osage-orange trees. My "exploring" continued unabated. I pretended I was a



*Ivri on the left;  
two wannabe professionals*

survivor of a Third World War. The challenge was to travel south before winter arrived and live on what I could find. I handicapped myself by setting up conditions such as so many feet of rope, one cooking pan, a few matches, a small tarp, a knife. I wandered the neighboring fields and collected wild spring asparagus in the hedgerows. I decided to try insects, so I collected grasshoppers, and secretly zapped them in Grandma's microwave. (The resulting explosion of hopper guts all over the inside of her machine cured me of repeating the experiment.)

At school, I sought a mentor in the natural sciences who could focus my energies. It turned out to be Dr. Don Distler, an ecology professor with a musty laboratory and classroom over an ancient gym at the edge of campus. He was the guardian of a forgotten museum of moth-eaten stuffed animals, aquariums full of odd fish and blind salamanders, snakes, a pet quail, laboratory mice and rats, a beetle colony used to clean bones, and a skunk. Distler hunkered in his cave of an office, which housed an entire library of nature books that towered to the ceiling. He quipped that there would be perdition to pay if the university made him move his office to the new biology building, as was annually threatened. Distler maintained that this glut, collected over decades, was in reality the framework that held up the walls, and its removal would cause the entire gymnasium to implode. Scuttlebutt had it that he kept a coyote in his backyard at home.

I heard about this eccentric man and looked him up. I introduced myself, said I was aiming to take some of his advanced courses, and asked his permission to sign up for them. I guess Distler recognized a kindred spirit. Shortly afterwards, I had a key to the back fire-escape entrance to his lab and was spending all of my afternoons there, memorizing the taxonomy of Kansas mammals. I soon was on the payroll, caring for the animals as a laboratory assistant. In his classes, I learned how to catch mammals with live traps, prepare museum study specimens, statistically weigh tree cover in a hardwood, and conduct a study of a farm pond. My mentor didn't even mind when he found out I was eating the mealworms out of their raising bins on dares (and thanks to that bravado, I became sensitized and am now allergic to the exoskeletons of all insects and shellfish).

Distler had an arrangement with the local zoo for specimens to add to his museum. Soon after I started working, I was given a fresh zebra head to prepare as a skull, "to show the minor dentition difference between zebras and horses." I took the head home to

Grandma Sybil, a forbearing woman, who allowed me to boil it for days in her biggest pot on the kitchen stove. First I tasted a piece of cheek meat, only to discover that it was, well, tough. In Grandma's kitchen, I also played more games, pretending that I only had one frying pan to cook with. That was not so difficult, so I burdened myself by deciding that I was in the desert and couldn't wash the pan with water. Just to see if I could do it. For weeks, I kept my grass-scoured skillet in the closet for daily re-use. I then tried cleaning by ants, but the wimpy Kansas varieties had little endurance for the task.<sup>15</sup>



*Grandma Sybil*

I audited a free university course on wildcrafting. Like a prelude to a gourmet wine-tasting party, we spent several sessions discussing the “delicious goodies out there awaiting our culinary discovery.” We all did our homework for the overnighter, arriving at one of the county parks for the culminating feast, festooned with tents, chairs, insect repellent, awnings, sun-screen, radio, petrol stove, lights, tables, fuel, water, cots, air mattresses, and sleeping bags. Our teacher had thoughtfully brought acorn and buckwheat flour and wild chokecherry jam for our enjoyment. We tromped over the prairie, collecting this leaf and that, to steep for tea.

Now for the truth: if one is limited to wild vegetation, long-term survival is impossible, and even short term, is a lesson in hunger. The human organism needs high quality protein to endure. The next morning, our bad-tasting oak-fruit pancakes were literally a bitter disappointment. We were encouraged to go prospecting again, this time to the lake. I spied a black-headed seagull, perched awkwardly on cast driftwood. Without thinking, I raced across the shore and captured the struggling bird as it attempted to fly away. One wing was broken, probably shot by a hunter.

The students ran up, “All right! You caught it! What are we going to do with it?”

“Eat it, of course!” No one wanted to make the kill, so I wrung its neck myself. On the way back, I caught a garter snake but released it; if survival really had been at stake, the snake would have joined

<sup>15</sup> The ants were supposed to eat the grunge out of the frying-pan. Instead I scrubbed it myself at least weekly, whether it needed it or not.

the bird in my belly. Back at camp, we carefully cooked and split the few ounces of meat that the bird possessed. A few hungry students took symbolic mouthfuls, but most were repulsed by the barbarous act. Until the group saw the gull in hand, meat had never entered our food discussions. At that moment, I decided that survival was, most importantly, a state of mind.

At the university, I enrolled in a hodgepodge of courses, skipping the basics and taking advanced biology courses that fired my interest. Still a freshman, I began tutoring disadvantaged students in biology and microbiology for a federal project. Soon, the project led to a job with a veterinarian, Dr. Othello Curry. Besides running his clinic, he was the consulting veterinarian at the Sedgwick County Zoo. I tagged along when he inspected an ill black rhino, talked to the curator about worming turtles, castrated a Belgian horse, and examined the eyes of a great horned-owl left there by the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks.



*Zookeeping*

A glimpse behind the scenes at the zoo was all that it took for me to realize that there was an immensely fascinating world of exotic animals out there—thousands and thousands of living species of animals about which little was known. Even their places of origin sounded wondrously romantic. These were not just ho-hum dogs, cats, cows, or horses we were talking about!

It became my secret desire to work at the zoo. At the end of my sophomore year, I interviewed for a zookeeper job at the soon-to-be-completed herpetarium at the zoo. I sported a brushed hair-do, shoes that pinched, and a ladyfied turtleneck-sweater pants suit.<sup>16</sup> I was valiantly hoping that this outfit would win the day and mask my thoughts, which were shouting, “*Just give me the job! I’ll work for bloody free!*” I got the position.

Thus began my apprenticeship in zookeeping. I was consumed with meeting the responsibility, overwhelmed with the beauty and wildness of my charges, and loved the hard work, for which I actually was paid twice a month. By the time I’d finished doing the illustrations of snakes, frogs, lizards, and turtles for the new building’s exhibit signs, I discovered that I disliked working in the

<sup>16</sup> It was bright orange, and I wore a hippie appleseed necklace, don’t ask me why.

cave-like herpetarium: it was entirely too confining and dark. Transferred, I worked everywhere else for five years, caring for elephants, hoofed stock, birds, farm animals, and carnivores.

As the years went by, I chose my goals carefully and watched for opportunities. The zoo became tame; my career wasn't advancing fast enough. I felt imprisoned beneath a glass ceiling that then was much lower for women, especially in the old-fashioned good-ole-boy zoo network. In the end, I was passed over for a promotion that I had worked hard for by going back to college to finish my bachelor's degree (didn't go to that ceremony, either!).

I was devastated and resigned in May 1983. I thought about art as a career. Months with pen and ink and watercolor brought only a five-dollar sale at a rinky-dink crafts show. I wasn't good enough.

I continued to apply for managerial zoo jobs around the country and took a road trip of 23 days, visiting 21 zoos and staying with zookeepers or sleeping in the bed of my Datsun truck. There were no offers. I was adrift. Six months after I left the Sedgwick County Zoo, my mother telephoned. "Delfi, have you thought about the Peace Corps? At least that will give you something to do while you figure out what you really want to do." The minute I heard the words, I knew she was right. Leaving the dang-gum country for a few years would be just the ticket.