

No Time to Say Goodbye

As if they were skins, I shed ten worlds before I was eighteen. When you move every year of your young life you have little time to ponder what was, only what's next.

My first world was in Santa Barbara a block from Cottage Hospital where I was born. It was across from Oak Park where my first dog, Rags, dragged me on his walks and where I played with my neighbor Alene. In our living room, a taller-than-me radio cabinet with a bright eye dial boomed news of the attack on Pearl Harbor. My nanny Kimi and her family left with other Japanese people who were sent to internment camps. My first move was a short distance away to the bigger Mission Street house with a creek running through the back yard.

I went off to Humpty Dumpty Nursery School as my second world unfolded. Air raid sirens blared at night rushing Mom and Dad to quickly dim lights. A warden knocked to complain that a shade allowed a ray to escape into the night. A Japanese submarine shelled oil storage tanks just up the coast in Goleta so we moved to Salinas where I lost my tonsils and cracked my elbow falling from the monkey bars. I went to kindergarten for six months before we drove across deserts to El Paso, Texas. Soon I crossed the US-Mexico border every day on the streetcar and met a whole new world...first grade in Spanish at Colegio Modelo in Juarez, Mexico. I learned to break a piñata at my sixth birthday party. Just as I got comfortable, I was ripped away from my bilingual world to a hot Phoenix summer of catch-up home schooling and, presto, ready to read and write second grade English.

Why didn't my six-year-old self cry out then? Oh, she did. She sobbed for the first month at the Colegio. No one understood it wasn't just being left by my mother, but the added terror of the transit into an unknown world. By the second extraction to Phoenix, my seven-year-old self became antagonistic. The sad and hurt scabbed over. The rage simmered for years.

I was busy surviving. I insisted on using my first name instead of my middle name. At least I knew I had become someone else. I had no words to express what I'd lost or how I felt. I was seen as stubborn and willful, even spoiled, an only child with parents old enough to be my grandparents. I distanced myself from my mother only calling her by made up names.

After I finished the second grade, my father went on to Bakersfield, California and my mother again took me across the border to Nogales, Mexico. By fall we were ensconced in our next house in Bakersfield where I spent the third grade. I begged for a puppy and Tippie was my Christmas present. I spent hours in the park training him to do all the usual dog tricks, to climb the slide's stairs, slide down and to teeter-totter with me. We were inseparable.

Dad was transferred to Redding, California. We bought a brand new house and I started violin lessons. Half way through the fourth grade Dad joined a joint Mexican American Commission and flew to Mexico City. By the end of June, belongings were stored, travel bags packed and Tippie was left at his new home. I can still see him standing by the gate as we drove away. Given how much I cared for him and the pleasure I took in his companionship, I must have been distraught. I don't remember tears, but I cry them now. A little turtle bought in San Francisco the next day may have been a consolation gift. I kept him in a margarine box with some lettuce and sat him on the train window ledge. We gathered belongings to transfer to the next train, and I forgot him. When I noticed, I tried to run back but the train was pulling out. I felt criminal imagining him there dying.

After a few months in Mexico City, Dad took a position in the field. My mother and I began three years of itinerancy living at seven different addresses. I went to four different schools. Dad came to visit just two days a month. I couldn't wait to see him. He always had little gifts for me and gave me my allowance. I've pushed out of my mind what it was like for him to be away so much. It made me angrier at my mother, as if she were to blame.

If we couldn't all be together, my mother wanted to go back to the States so my father got stationed in Guadalajara. We moved to a townhouse near the YWCA and the Catholic school I attended. That year was the

happiest of my childhood. We lived a family life again. There were company dinners with friends every weekend from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day. And, it felt like I had found a real home.

But my mother worried I was becoming too Mexican and decided it was time to return to the States. She and I left Mexico for Northern Michigan, where my father was born. The summer of my thirteenth year I was enrolled in an eight week mini-world of the National Music Camp...a preview of the emotionally grueling freshman year to come. I knew no one. I participated in activities but much of time I felt bewildered and out of place.

Of all my transitions, the next two years were the most painful. It was devastating to lose the comfort I felt for the foreign, new world of rural Michigan. As I write, a sinkhole in my stomach pulls me down into heartbreaking grief: loss of the warmth and care of an embracing culture (a culture of *besos y abrazos*), loss of being understood as the person I had grown into, loss of my Guadalajara life and of the successful girl that did synchronized swimming and had friends. Without my awareness, my gut and my heart echoed past losses, especially those at the Colegio in Juarez, losses intensified and carried to Phoenix, and Bakersfield and Redding and Mexico, to times when I had no words, no power, only tears and anger to show how I felt about what was happening to me.

I didn't even know what I didn't know in this alien teen-age world: how to wear my hair, how to dress, how to dance, English slang, living in cold and snow, learning algebra in English instead of in Spanish. When I couldn't belong to the most popular group I felt put down, hurt, less than...alone.

Dad stayed on in Mexico. I missed him even more and didn't see him again for a year. My only solace was writing to him, begging to be with him. In my misery I cried as I wrote, almost every day. Talking with him on the phone after he transferred to Los Angeles made it worse. He tried to comfort me. I could hear his frustration when his words of "it will get better, don't worry, you'll be alright" didn't stop my pain and sadness. I concealed my dejection from my mother.

Before my sophomore year Mom and I moved to a village twelve miles away. People there remembered growing up with my father; some were shirttail cousins. They invited us to church, school ballgames and Saturday night community dances. It felt good.

Then it was fall and time for school. The few friends I'd made my first year now treated me as a country hick. Before the end of the year I told my mother I was not going back the next year. I was adamant that I go to another high school.

By now I had learned enough about being a teenager to pass. Even though most students at my new school knew each other since kindergarten, I felt included. It wasn't long before I had a popular football hero boyfriend. I joined every activity from marching band to drama. I was a top student, editor of the yearbook and a cheerleader. I worked in the town drugstore, learned to drive and went on the Senior Trip to Washington, D.C.—just like a real USian. It was glorious and I loved it. And I'd done it myself.

Each time I left one place for another, a world vanished: who I was and what I had to offer changed, competencies became irrelevant, my sense of security diminished. Culture, language, neighborhoods, familiar sounds, favorite foods and ambient music disappeared. I lost friends I'd come to depend on, lost my place in community. Cherished possessions and pets were given up. My feelings were buried. Ruth Van Reken (*Third Culture Kids*) and Norma McCaig helped me recognize losses I hid. It has taken me years to grow courage enough to emerge from denial, own my unresolved grief and embrace the fullness of my life.