

Is There Life Out There?

By Stacie Penney

A young widow returns to her Midwestern hometown to pick-up the fragments of her life.

Chapter One - Journey and Arrival

The night envelops my car as I drive across the states between my life and my future. All of the details of what needed to be accomplished in the last fifteen days had been running through my mind. They continued running out of habit. The house is rented; I left the key with the neighbors. Their daughter and her husband are renting it and they won't be in Oshkosh until tomorrow. My elderly neighbors are thrilled that their daughter will once again be close to them. I think she is crazy. Living in the same town as my mother-in-law was bad; I can't begin to imagine what living next door would be like.

House - check.

Technically I quit my job, turned all of my clients over to capable co-workers. Sorted out the various quirky personalities of the accounts that I had been managing for the last five years. The people I worked for choose to view my departure as a sabbatical. Closer than an employer, more like friends, they believe as much as I do that I need this break. Time to think, they said. Find your base. Fill in the holes that life has thrown at you. Etc., etc. They think I will be back. I told them to find someone else. But they know me too well. As much as I need to leave, to get away, to shake off the depression I have been in for the last ten months, I will need to come back. Returning to my childhood home is just a change of pace. It is not anything permanent.

I won't let it be anything more.

Job - check.

The financial aspects of my life had been taken care of ten months ago. Profiting from tragedy doesn't sit well, but what else could I do? Burn the check? My husband and I had taken out the policy just in case. I didn't want it to be necessary. The renters would cover what was left of the house payment. The credit cards and car loans had been absolved. The utilities were switched to someone else's name. My cell phone was canceled. I knew that the technology existed in South Dakota, but I also remembered that towers were few and far between. Sprint didn't think it was worthwhile to have them in the tiny town that I grew up in. Not that I blamed them. I spent most of my youth thinking it wasn't worthwhile to be there either.

Finances - check.

The sticky piece was friends and family. I hadn't seen many of my husband's relatives in the months that had passed. It might have been easier to continue as we had in the past, with our pretence of enjoying each other's company, but I couldn't. The force that bound me to them was gone. I was tired of trying to understand the family dynamics of people we only saw on the special occasion days. If they were not there for the everyday things, why should the special days matter? It wasn't just their fault either; my husband and I were just as guilty.

My family. That's a whole different monster. I couldn't even begin to explain my

family. They were as incomprehensible as my husband's but for entirely different reasons. I know that I will be seeing them soon, so I don't even try to explain them, not even to myself.

Things change, I chant.

People change, I chant.

Remember that.

My friends still tried, but I could tell that they didn't understand why I was incapable of moving on. Explaining why I should, why I couldn't, to myself, countless times in the bathroom mirror didn't work either. Sometimes foggy, sometimes streaked, sometimes splattered from God only knows what. No matter the state of the mirror, I couldn't make my reasons sound believable to myself. If I didn't believe them, why should anybody else? But, bless them, they still came over, still invited me out. Just as if nothing had changed. Only it had.

Family, friends. - check.

The two-lane Highway 21 finally got to where I was going. The bright lights of La Crosse were ahead. Traffic was light; it was, after all, 1:30 in the morning. Who wanted to be up and driving at this time besides truckers with their rigs and business men and women anxious for tomorrow's meeting? Or would the business people be like that, I wondered.

The change in thought was welcomed.

Too little sleep to be effective if they were racing for a big meeting. What other reasons would my husband have come up with? We often drove in the middle of the night, when we took trips. Those memories were too painful. Just bringing them to the surface of my mind brought unwelcome tears to my eyes. I brushed the tears and thoughts away.

"Check the gas gauge," I said just to hear a voice.

It was near full, but I stopped anyway. Just to get out and talk to someone. Even the idiotic words exchanged with the attendant could make the tears stop.

I topped off the tank, browsed the shelves for something I may have forgotten and need before I arrived. But I found nothing. I used the restroom, just in case. The scent of lemon cleanser lingered in the air, I noticed as I carefully washed my hands for twenty seconds. Just like I wanted to teach...but my mind came to a brick wall. That section of my life was definitely off limits.

I picked up a bottle of water, a couple of bottles of soda. No food, though. I couldn't remember the last time I had been hungry. I knew I ate, but I did it out of habit, not from hunger. My clothes showed it too. Shirts hung off bony shoulders that had never been bony before. Pants that used to be snug and uncomfortable by the end of the day now required a belt. I had cheekbones, quite the accomplishment for the girl who never lost her baby fat. Losing baby fat was impossible for girls of German descent. A fat kid could give up a donut easier than my hips would give up their padding.

Even with the weight I had lost, I was still curvy. I would have to go on one of those extreme makeover shows to look like the anorexic models that were all the rage in the world of fashion. I hardly noticed what I wore. My black curls hung

down my back because it was easiest. I might try a ponytail, if they were in my way. Anything else was more work than I was capable of.

As I drove over the blackest stretch of Interstate 90, the stretch after the river valley ended, my eyes focused on the headlights' beam, knowing from the mile markers Austin was 47 miles away. I thought about the first intern the company had ever hired. Pat, my boss, assigned her to me, thinking that if I had an extra pair of hands, I would be able to be a little more (read: a lot more) organized.

I still feel sorry for the intern. It really wasn't her fault, but mine. I went along with Pat's crazy idea. What I was thinking, I will never know. I gave the intern, whose name I won't reveal, just in case you know her, the keys to my cabinets. Cabinets that no one but me had ever been in. Not only was my form of filing loosely structured, I filed by clients' names, account names, fragmented pieces, things that needed further development and whatever I was interested in was on top.

In other words, I opened the drawer, took out everything that pertained to whatever I was working on. When I was done, I put the whole mess back in the drawer. And I wasn't the sort of person who worked on one account at a time. I would get a great idea for someone else and since it was so brilliant, I started on it too. Which meant more paperwork, more files, more mess.

After working in those filing cabinets for five years, you can imagine what they looked like. But the intern was a trooper. Undaunted, she opened them and started digging. The mess she made was worse than anything I had ever made when I worked with my scraps, post-its and legal pads. But she found a structure through the files, an order that I subconsciously followed, or so she claimed. Using that order, she organized ever scrap of paper, found a way to keep all of the pertinent pieces together, to destroy the chaos that I had nested in.

I couldn't find a damn thing. I always had to ask where this bit was or what folder that scrap found its way into. It might have looked nice, but I couldn't use it. So I destroyed it. The intern made the mistake of taking a day off. When I couldn't find it, I went looking. The process ended with me having my files the way I liked them. Pat never tried to organize my filing cabinets again.

When the intern came back and saw what I had done, she quit. I think. I never saw her again at work anyway. If it was me, I would have hid. But really that is why I was heading to South Dakota, wasn't it?

This drive's one I've made countless times throughout my adult life. Adult life beginning at age eighteen. After I hit I-90, it was smooth sailing. It was the first part, Highway 21 that always bothered me. Depending on how it went on that road, set my mood for the first two hours of my trip. The two-lane highway held more cars, semis, trucks and farm implements than it was licensed for. It never failed that I got behind the person who felt that the conditions were too dangerous to go the speed limit, even if it was 70s, sunny and cloudless. Five to ten miles under the limit was the norm. It pissed me off. But I was in Minnesota and well past the horrors of Highway 21.

Austin's lights were visible from 7 miles away. And the signs for the Spam museum rose proportionally to the decrease in distance. Why Spam was deserving of a museum was beyond my thinking capabilities. But we mid-westerners took pride in what we had. The Wisconsin traffic probably stopped just so they could take pictures of themselves and the poster board of Brett Favre holding a can of

Spam. Have you ever tried the stuff? It is nasty. I ate it once, not realizing until years later that it was Spam. When you eat school food for lunch, you just take certain things for granted. Like not asking what mystery meat was. As soon as I was old enough, I started making my own lunches to take instead of trusting the cafeteria's efforts.

I went to college in Oshkosh and stayed there after graduation. It was a nice town, friendly, productive. And bigger. That was the main appeal to go there in the first place. Not so far away to make the holiday trips terrible, but far enough that people wouldn't be popping in unexpectedly either. And it was big. Growing up in a town of 312 people makes 60,000 seem enormous. Countless towns of good size were within a ninety-minute drive. I loved Oshkosh, but it was too painful right now.

Austin was far behind me and the miles kept ticking, the mile markers kept counting down. It is a little known fact that when driving from the east side of Minnesota to the west, that the mile markers count down. If you know the exit number, then you can do the math and figure out how much farther. For me the exit was in South Dakota, so I had to do some addition for the new state, but anything to keep my brain occupied.

One exit sign sparked some good memories and I indulged in them.

Mankato, Minnesota, was the stomping grounds of a roommate's boyfriend. They spend every weekend together, either in her college dorm room in Oshkosh or his in Mankato. I made the trip with her a few times and spent it in his room as well. My favorite part of the campus was the coffee shop that was a five or ten minute walk away.

I loved that coffee shop. So much that I considered transferring to MSU just so I could work there. The one in Mankato was strictly college students. The occasional non-college student might come in, but it always kept the feeling of homework deadlines being met, late night study sessions juxtaposed with time to unwind.

Something in the atmosphere appealed to me. I loved the purple walls, the tiny bathrooms, the tip jar. Patrons knew one another. Personalized mugs hung on the wall. Plug-ins were available for my laptop whose battery was always dying on me. I would plug myself in and work through whatever coding exercise my professors had assigned. Or I would read the book that my lit class was assigned for the month. Computer science major, English lit minor. Odd bedfellows, but I made it work. Pat, my boss, loved it. She said it brought together two pioneering efforts of creative forces. All I knew was I was happiest in front of a screen or with my nose stuck in a book.

My reminiscing had carried me passed Worthington and almost to the border. At least the trip was going fast. I was making good time, I thought as I cruised the next 57 miles to Sioux Falls. No stop here was convenient, but I had to pee. Too much water and soda. Only an hour left, I thought as I climbed into my car after the break. Child's play to the drive I just made.

The radio was tuned into one of three stations I could get. The selection on all of them was terrible - oldies, country, or leftovers from the 80s. I left it on the country station because the announcers were funny. Every so often I would find myself humming to one of the songs. Country singers must never go out of style; every song I recognized had been played on the radio for the last fifteen years.

Finally, Exit 332. Ten miles to go to my brother's house. He and his wife graciously extended their guest room and air mattress to me. Truth of the matter is, I'm paying rent. Even if it's not money, I said I would work for my room and board. I wasn't ready to hang out a shingle for my computer skills and neither of them had any use for my talent and creativity. I figured I would shovel the walks or cook. I wouldn't clean; this they knew. But I would find some way to make myself useful.

That was my intention anyway.

The red sign declared "Ethan" in huge white letters. An arrow pointed left. Nothing indicated, though, why anyone would want to turn left to Ethan. The sole purpose of paving the connecting county road was to stop the residents from complaining. A mile down the county road, a right hand turn and I was there. Bright lights welcomed me here as had every other town on my trek.

My brain is awfully foggy. I didn't sleep before starting out. And the eight-hour drive had got to me. I just didn't realize how bad it was until I sat in the driveway of my childhood home. I didn't know who lived there after Will sold the place ten years ago. If they had a dog or a cat, it was probably wondering who was showing up on its doorstep at 6:30 in the morning. Thanks to the switch from Daylight Savings time, the sky was dark enough to need lights on in the house and headlights for safety.

I backed out of the driveway, wishing I hadn't just done what I did. It wasn't that I hated the house or my childhood. But in the tradition of daughters and mothers, my mom and me didn't get along so great. More memories I had run from and still was unwilling to face. Memories that only had one side to resolve them.

God, I need sleep. Maybe some coffee. Or a cigarette, even though I hadn't smoked in ten years. Living with non-smokers would do that to a smoker. Having other peoples' small children around is another good deterrent. I had always been more of a social smoker anyway. But stress would push me to it as well. If this wasn't stress I didn't know what was.

I pointed my car to the east, back the way I had come. I drove right by my brother's house which was on the same street as our childhood home. Habit, I guessed. He had lived there for six or seven years, but I had been there only three or four times. Growing up some old lady lived there. All I remember of her was getting yelled at for picking the lilacs off her trees. Wonder if Will will keep that tradition up?

The outside light was on, welcoming me. Will had said. "Just go on in. Your room will be at the top of the stairs."

It wasn't a bad room; just a little cold since there wasn't any heat registers. "There's a space heater for the other room, Megan's sewing room. Use that," he said.

Grateful that the air mattress was already blown up, I collapsed on to it. Too tired to do more than take off my shoes, I fell into a troubled sleep. The sort of sleep that had plagued me for the last ten months, ever since I opened the door and found the police on the other side.

