

I've Been Lost in Milwaukee in the Rain: The Serendipity of Travel



Louse Colln

is the author of five nationally and internationally published books. Her poetry, short stories, and articles have won statewide contests and have been published in national magazines.

Two, three, or four people in a car going somewhere they've never been before or back to a place they loved the last time is one of the happiest situations I know. The anticipation or memory of what is around the next curve or over the next hill is mind expanding.

There are few places I don't like to be. I like being where pioneers and Indians have been and hearing what happened there. I like the mysteries of who lived here and how did they live, as at Indian Mounds where artifacts show that the first American natives also liked to travel.

I liked being wakened in a motel in Nebraska by the wind whistling across the plains just as it did when the pioneers, the Indians, the people between the ice ages, and the dinosaurs slept there. The land is itself and changes for no one.

Some of the things I like most frighten me. I like the feel of mountains, the sharp spikes of bare peaks, and the dark, vaguely menacing bulk when night is moving over them. But there are times when I am simply trying to hide the fact that I'm not looking as we drive across the edge of nothing.

I like the valleys where a part of me reaches out to the mountains sweeping away and the canyons where I feel more inwardly complete in the shadow of the gigantic layers of rock, beside the river that cut them down.

A great Colorado memory is of being lost somewhere on a lumber road in the Rockies, where we probably weren't supposed to be. We ate tuna sandwiches beside a shallow stream, while a small boy in the party piled up rocks to build a dam across it. Small boys, too, are part of nature and the water simply tumbled over his rocks. Later we made sandwiches on top of a mountain by having one person hold the bread down from an end of a hurricane wind while the other layered ham and cheese, and shared the sandwiches with a young couple passing through from Illinois.

One of my favorite places in the Rockies is a real ghost town in Colorado where few tourists visit. There is nothing except pieces of falling buildings, some humps where buildings used to be (and graves

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still are), and the greatest silence I have ever heard among the pine trees whose needles pad the ground so deeply that it feels like walking on water..

Riding down the Upper Michigan finger to Copper Harbor, we kept hearing of winter snow measured in feet. Watching clouds weave in from the lake to melt into nothing above us, we spoke without meaning it, of spending a year there to experience the seasons.

I like to walk in history. We took a boat across a small tongue of dancing Lake Superior to the Old Light House, where we wandered among Pre-Cambrian rocks. On the other side of the point, near the place where one of John Jacob Astor's sailing ships was storm wrecked in the nineteenth century, we imagined the storm, and saw a black spoon bowl rusted out to a dark metallic lace, floating among the rocks at our feet. It danced tantalizingly before us then sank under a wave so quickly we questioned our senses.

Driving south from Omaha to Kansas City we traveled through a flat plain, pressed down millennia ago by a heavy tongue of ice. We drove along beside a line of rough dirt hills, pushed up by the eastern edge of the ice. Soon we begin to see hills curving in from the west. They come closer together in a rounded triangle until, shortly before St. Joseph, we crossed them. Then ancient heaps of earth drift along, shaped like waves of melt water rolling off to form the dashing Missouri River.

Lost on a genealogical trip to South Carolina every road we drove down took us to an unplanned town, where we found unexpected fortunes of information and, isolated on a mountain road, the best southern country cooking I have ever eaten. Then a good night's sleep in a lodge pressed so deep in nature it caused the creation of a poem of enchantment (not mine).

About midway between home in Tennessee and back home in Missouri, we stop overnight in a lodge where the frisky Current River is playing with the idea of changing the landscape by pitching its soft waves against the graveled shore, leaving a small island between its possible new course and its old one. Something there massages my creative soul, and I have never left without some new expressions.

Once upon a time in Milwaukee, in a slow autumn rain, we drove over and under the Interstate but missed the on ramp again and again. The low clouds kept odors close to earth and, even through closed windows, the old world scent of sauerkraut and beer crowded into the car. Is the town at its best in the rain? My memories of an hour drifting through its damp nostalgia are treasure.

You don't have to get lost to enjoy traveling, but it helps.