

Introduction: Traveling

There is a woman who looks familiar, yet very different. I am watching her on a videotape. She has my face, hair, and body, but her actions and speech are someone else's. She is sitting *seiza* [on her knees]. Her movements are confined and controlled. She is speaking a foreign language. When she laughs, she raises her hand and delicately covers her mouth. Although she looks different from the Japanese women in the video, she seems to fit into the environment.

The video was made in 1987, at the end of my second year in Japan. Traveling was not new to me the first time I went to Japan in 1985. I feel I have always been a traveler, moving in and out of different spaces. Let me go back to the beginning.

I am now 8 years old and with my grandfather, my first traveling companion. I clutch his hand as we cross the street and enter into Bronx Park. The city streets are far behind as I climb freely up and down the rocks along the winding river path that leads into the zoo. We always stop along the way to sit on a certain bench, and grandpa points to a spot where he tells me it said "Lou loves Mary" a long time ago.

I try to imagine my grandmother sitting on that bench with my grandfather. Grandma doesn't come with us to the zoo; she is too busy—cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping. Sometimes grandma travels back to her childhood in the stories she tells of growing up in a

small town near Odessa, in a house with flowers in a garden. She is uprooted from this home when she is 12, when her father is killed and the rest of her family is persecuted for being Jews.

Grandpa becomes very playful when we are away from home. He tells me stories about the “friends” we meet at the zoo, or, as he usually refers to the apes and gorillas, “relatives—on the *other* side of the family.” Grandpa has another beer before we say good-bye to our caged friends and return to the other side of the zoo gates.

I remember wanting to go away, somewhere far, ever since I was a small child. Maybe it is because my mother went away when I was very young. She had a nervous breakdown and committed herself to a mental hospital not long after she aborted her third pregnancy. I can still hear my father’s voice yelling, “Murderer!” After spending a year in Creedmore in the mid-1960s, my mother came back home. But her mental health never returned. I don’t remember her very much after she came back. One day I clearly remember. I had just started third grade. I came home from school and found everything boxed up—and my father all ready to go. My mother wasn’t home and I didn’t want to leave her. But I didn’t say this. I was too frightened that he would leave me too and take my sister with him. I was 7 years old and afraid to speak.

I never questioned my mother’s mental illness. I was told she was “sick” and I believed it, even though she didn’t really seem sick when I talked to her or visited her in the various mental hospitals in which she lived. But what else could it be? She had been diagnosed by a doctor, after all.

Now I am in Mrs. Specter’s fifth-grade class. I write a horror story about people being tortured with red-hot irons and cut up into tiny pieces. I show it to Mrs. Specter and eagerly await her glowing response. “You don’t use the word ‘caution,’” she reprimands as she

hands the paper back to me. Maybe she sensed some problems and didn't want to deal with anything except for my vocabulary deficiency. This was one of the last pieces I remember writing for school. I must have been using plenty of caution.

I am 19 and traveling around the world. As I cross international borders, I feel free and powerful. I move around open and trusting of people. I begin to write again. I write about my week-long climb up the Himalayas with two guys who treat me as a climber and not a "girl." I write about the time I almost drown in the middle of the Sunda Straits when our small banana boat sinks, and then, after finally being rescued, taken to (and then left on!) a small deserted island. I write about the people I meet—the brief, intense encounters, the families who let me stay in their homes. I imagine these stories will someday turn into a wonderful book. However, the journal that makes it all around the world gets lost shortly after I return home, when I pass it into the hands of a family member.

I am now 29 and traveling around the world again. I don't feel as free and powerful as I had 10 years before. One night in India, I am brutally and violently assaulted by two men. I close down completely. I can't breathe the air anymore, so I dive into the sea and learn how to breathe underwater. Deeply submerged as I am, everything is quiet. I concentrate only on the sounds of my breath. Inhale. Exhale. The heavy tank on my back becomes lighter. The sharks no longer scare me. After several months underwater, I resurface slowly, and, for the first time since I lost my journal, I begin to write once again.

Making my personal life public brings up many fears—fear of revealing my secrets, fear of rejection, fear of attention, fear of getting hurt. The risks I'm taking and lines I'm crossing by writing openly about my experiences as a woman in the world seem even more dangerous than some of the travel experiences I've had. But

I believe these risks are necessary in order to evolve, to live life more fully, to uncover thoughts and feelings that for so long have been hidden and smothered, and to hear my voice amid the din of other people's voices.