

Borders

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When I was maybe thirteen, my mother announced that we were going to go to Salt Lake City to visit my sister who had left the reserve, moved across the line, and found a job. Laetitia had not left home with my mother's blessing, but over time my mother had come to be proud of the fact that Laetitia had done all of this on her own.

"She did really good," my mother would say.

Then there were the fine points to Laetitia's going. She had not, as my mother liked to tell Mrs. Manyfingers, gone floating after some man like a balloon on a string. She hadn't snuck out of the house, either, and gone to Vancouver or Edmonton or Toronto to chase rainbows down alleys.

"She did real good."

I was seven or eight when Laetitia left home. She was seventeen. Our father was from Rocky Boy on the American side.

"Dad's American," Laetitia told my mother, "so I can go and come as I please."

"Send us a postcard."

Laetitia packed her things, and we headed for the border. Just outside of Milk River, Laetitia told us to watch for the water tower.

"Over the next rise. It's the first thing you see."

"We got a water tower on the reserve," my mother said. "There's a big one in Lethbridge, too."

"You'll be able to see the tops of the flagpoles, too. That's where the border is."

When we got to Coutts, my mother stopped at the convenience store and bought her and Laetitia a cup of coffee. I got an Orange Crush.

* * *

"This is real lousy coffee."

"You're just angry because I want to see the world."

“It’s the water. From here on down, they got lousy water.”

“I can catch the bus from Sweetgrass. You don’t have to lift a finger.”

“You’re going to have to buy your water in bottles if you want good coffee.”

There was an old wooden building about a block away, with a tall sign in the yard that said “Museum”. Most of the roof had been blown away. Mom told me to go and see when the place was open. There were boards over the windows and doors. You could tell that the place was closed, and I told Mom so, but she said to go and check anyway. Mom and Laetitia stayed by the car. Neither of them moved. I sat down on the steps of the museum and watched them, and I don’t know that they ever said anything to each other. Finally, Laetitia got her bag out of the trunk and gave Mom a hug.

I wandered back to the car. The wind had come up, and it blew Laetitia’s hair across her face. Mom reached out and pulled the strands out of Laetitia’s eyes, and Laetitia let her.

“You can still see the mountain from here,” my mother told Laetitia in Blackfoot.

“Lots of mountains in Salt Lake,” Laetitia told her in English.

“The place is closed,” I said. “Just like I told you.”

Laetitia tucked her hair into her jacket and dragged her bag down the road to the brick building with the American flag flapping on a pole. When she got to where the guards were waiting, she turned, put the bag down, and waved to us. We waved back. Then my mother turned the car around, and we came home.

We got postcards from Laetitia regular, and, if she wasn’t spreading jelly on the truth, she was happy. She found a good job and rented an apartment with a pool,

“And she can’t even swim,” my mother told Mrs. Manyfingers.

* * *

Most of the postcards said we should come down and see the city, but whenever I mentioned this, my mother would stiffen up.

So I was surprised when she bought two new tires for the car and put on her blue dress with the yellow flowers. I had to dress up, too, for my mother did not want us crossing the border looking like slobs. We made sandwiches and put them in a big box with pop and potato chips and some apples and bananas and a big jar of water.

“But we can stop at one of those restaurants, too, right?”

“We maybe should take some blankets in case you get sleepy.”

“But we can stop at one of those restaurants, too, right?”

The border was actually two towns, though neither one was big enough to amount to anything. Coutts was on the Canadian side and consisted of the convenience store and gas station, the museum that was closed and boarded up, and a motel. Sweetgrass was on the American side, but all you could see was an overpass that arched across the highway and disappeared into the prairies. Just hearing the names of these towns, you would expect that Sweetgrass, which is a nice name and sounds like it is related to other places such as Medicine Hat and Moose Jaw and Kicking Horse Pass, would be on the Canadian side, and that Coutts, which sounds abrupt and rude, would be on the American side. But this was not the case.

Between the two borders was a duty-free shop where you could buy cigarettes and liquor and flags. Stuff like that.

We left the reserve in the morning and drove until we got to Coutts.

“Last time we stopped here,” my mother said, “you had an Orange Crush. You remember that?”

“Sure,” I said. “That was when Laetitia took off.”

“You want another Orange Crush?”

“That means we’re not going to stop at a restaurant, right?”

* * *

My mother got a coffee at the convenience store, and we stood around and watched the prairies move in the sunlight. Then we climbed back in the car. My mother straightened the dress across her thighs, leaned against the wheel, and drove all the way to the border in first gear, slowly, as if she were trying to see through a bad storm or riding high on black ice.

The border guard was an old guy. As he walked to the car, he swayed from side to side, his feet set wide apart, the holster on his hip pitching up and down. He leaned into the window, looked into the back seat, and looked at my mother and me.

“Morning, ma’am.”

“Good morning.”

“Where you heading?”

“Salt Lake City.”

“Purpose of your visit?”

“Visit my daughter.”

“Citizenship?”

“Blackfoot,” my mother told him.

“Ma’am?”

“Blackfoot,” my mother repeated.

“Canadian?”

“Blackfoot.”

It would have been easier if my mother had just said “Canadian” and been done with it, but I could see she wasn’t going to do that. The guard wasn’t angry or anything. He smiled and looked towards the building. Then he turned back and nodded.

“Morning, ma’am.”

“Good morning.”

“Any firearms or tobacco?”

“No.”

“Citizenship?”

“Blackfoot.”

He told us to sit in the car and wait, and we did. In about five minutes, another guard came out with the first man. They were talking as they came, both men swaying back and forth like two cowhands headed for a bar or a gunfight.

“Morning, ma’am.”

“Good morning.”

“Cecil tells me you and the boy are Blackfoot.”

“That’s right.”

“Now, I know that we got Blackfeet on the American side and the Canadians got Blackfeet on their side. Just so we can keep our records straight, what side do you come from?”

I knew exactly what my mother was going to say, and I could have told them if they had asked me.

“Canadian side or American side?” asked the guard.

“Blackfoot side,” she said.

It didn't take them long to lose their sense of humour, I can tell you that. The one guard stopped smiling altogether and told us to park our car at the side of the building and come in.

We sat on a wood bench for about an hour before anyone came over to talk us. This time it was a woman. She had a gun, too.

“Hi,” she said. “I'm inspector Pratt. I understand there is a little misunderstanding.”

“I'm going to visit my daughter in Salt Lake City,” my mother told her. “We don't have any guns or beer.”

“It's a legal technicality, that's all.”

“My daughter's Blackfoot, too.”

The woman opened a briefcase and took out a couple of forms and began to write on one of them. “Everyone who crosses our border has to declare their citizenship. Even Americans. It helps us keep track of the visitors we get from various countries.

She went on like that for maybe fifteen minutes, and a lot of the stuff she told us was interesting.

“I can understand how you feel about having to tell us your citizenship, and here's what I'll do. You tell me, and I won't put it down on the form. No one will know but you and me.”

Her gun was silver. There were several chips in the wood handle and the name “Stella” was scratched into the metal butt.

We were in the border office for about four hours, and we talked to almost everyone there. One of the men bought me a Coke. My mother brought a couple of sandwiches in from the car. I offered part of mine to Stella, but she said she wasn't hungry.

I told Stella that we were Blackfoot and Canadian, but she said that didn't count because I was a minor. In the end, she told us that if my mother didn't declare her citizenship, we would have to go back to where we came from. My mother stood up and thanked Stella for her time. Then we got back in the car and drove to the Canadian border, which was only about ninety metres away.

I was disappointed. I hadn't seen Laetitia for a long time, and I had never been to Salt Lake City.

* * *

When she was still at home, Laetitia would go on and on about Salt Lake City. She had never been there, but her boyfriend Lester Tallbull had spent a year in Salt Lake at a technical school.

"It's a great place," Lester would say. "Nothing but blondes in the whole state."

Whenever he said that, Laetitia would slug him on his shoulder hard enough to make him flinch. He had some brochures on Salt Lake and some maps, and every so often the two of them would spread them out on the table.

"That's the temple. It's right downtown. You got to have a pass to get in."

"Charlotte says anyone can go in and look around."

"When was Charlotte in Salt Lake? Just when was Charlotte in Salt Lake?"

"Last year."

"This is Liberty Park. It's got a zoo. There's good skiing in the mountains."

"Got all the skiing we can use," my mother would say. "People come from all over the world to ski at Banff. Cardston's got a temple, if you like those kind of things."

"Oh, this one is real big." Lester would say. "They got armed guards and everything."

"Not what Charlotte says."

"What does she know?"

Lester and Laetitia broke up, but I guess the idea of Salt Lake stuck in her mind.

* * *

The Canadian border guard was a young woman, and she seemed happy to see us. "Hi," she said. "You folks sure have a great day for a trip. Where are you coming from?"

"Stand-off."

"Is that in Montana?"

"No."

"Where are you going?"

"Stand-off."

The woman's name was Carol and I don't guess she was any older than Laetitia. "Wow, you both Canadians?"

“Blackfoot.”

“Really? I have a friend I went to school with who is Blackfoot. Do you know Mike Harley?”

“No.”

“He went to school in Lethbridge, but he’s really from Browning.”

It was a nice conversation and there were no cars behind us, so there was no rush.

“You’re not bringing any liquor back, are you?”

“No.”

“Any cigarettes or plants or stuff like that?”

“No.”

“Citizenship?”

“Blackfoot.”

“I know,” said the woman, “and I’d be proud of being Blackfoot if I were Blackfoot. But you have to be American or Canadian.”

* * *

When Laetitia and Lester broke up, Lester took his brochures and maps with him, so Laetitia wrote to someone in Salt Lake City, and, about a month later, she got a big envelope of stuff. We sat at the table and opened up all the brochures, and Laetitia read each one out loud.

“Salt Lake City is the gateway to some of the world’s most magnificent skiing.

“Salt Lake City is the home of one of the newest professional basketball franchises, the Utah Jazz.

“The Great Salt Lake is one of the natural wonders of the world.”

It was kind of exciting seeing all those colour brochures on the table and listening to Laetitia read all about how Salt Lake City was one of the best places in the entire world.

“That Salt Lake City place sounds too good to be true,” my mother told her.

“It has everything.”

“We got everything right here.”

“It’s boring here.”

“People in Salt Lake City are probably sending away for brochures of Calgary and Lethbridge and Pincher Creek right now.”

In the end, my mother would say that maybe Laetitia should go to Salt Lake City, and Laetitia would say that maybe she would.

* * *

We parked the car to the side of the building and Carol led us into a small room on the second floor. I found a comfortable spot on the couch and flipped through some back issues of Saturday Night and Alberta Report.

When I woke up, my mother was just coming out of another office. She didn’t say a word to me. I followed her down the stairs and out to the car.

I thought we were going home, but she turned the car around and drove back towards the American border, which made me think we were going to visit Laetitia in Salt Lake City after all. Instead she pulled into the parking lot of the duty-free store and stopped.

“We going to see Laetitia?”

“No.”

“We going home?”

Pride is a good thing to have, you know. Laetitia had a lot of pride, and so did my mother. I figured that someday, I’d have it, too.

“So where are we going?”

Most of that day, we wandered around the duty-free store, which wasn’t very large. The manager had a name tag with a tiny American flag on one side and a tiny Canadian flag on the other. His name was Mel. Toward evening, he began suggesting that we should be on our way. I told him we had nowhere to go, that neither the Americans nor the Canadians would let us in. He laughed at that and told us that we should buy something or leave.

The car was not very comfortable, but we did have all that food and it was April, so even if it did snow as it sometimes does on the prairies, we wouldn’t freeze. The next morning my mother drove to the American border.

It was a different guard this time, but the questions were the same. We didn’t spend as much time in the office as we had the day before. By noon, we were back at the Canadian border. By two we were back in the duty-free shop parking lot.

The second night in the car was not as much fun as the first, but my mother seemed in good spirits, and, all in all, it was much an adventure as an inconvenience. There wasn't much food left and that was a problem, but we had lots of water as there was a faucet in the side of the duty-free shop.

* * *

One Sunday, Laetitia and I were watching television. Mom was over at Mrs. Manyfingers's. Right in the middle of the program, Laetitia turned off the set and said she was going to Salt Lake City, that life around here was too boring. I had wanted to see the rest of the program and really didn't care if Laetitia went to Salt Lake City or not. When Mom got home, I told her what Laetitia had said.

What surprised me was how angry Laetitia got when she found out that I had told Mom.

"You got a big mouth."

"That's what you said."

"What I said is none of your business."

"I didn't say anything."

"Well, I'm going for sure, now."

That weekend, Laetitia packed her bags, and we drove her to the border.

* * *

Mel turned out to be friendly. When he closed up for the night and found us still parked in the lot, he came over and asked us if our car was broken down or something. My mother thanked him for his concern and told him that we were fine, that things would get straightened out in the morning.

"You're kidding," said Mel. "You'd think they could handle the simple things."

"We got some apples and a banana," I said, "but we're all out of ham sandwiches."

"You know, you read about these things, but you just don't believe it. You just don't believe it."

"Hamburgers would be even better because they got more stuff for energy."

My mother slept in the back seat. I slept in the front because I was smaller and could lie under the steering wheel. Late that night, I heard my mother open the car door. I found her sitting out on her blanket leaning against the bumper of the car.

“You see all those stars,” she said. “When I was a little girl, my grandmother used to take me and my sisters out on the prairies and tell us stories about all the stars.”

“Do you think Mel is going to bring us any hamburgers?”

“Every one of those stars has a story. You see that bunch of stars over there that look like fish?”

“He didn’t say no.”

“Coyote went fishing, one day. That’s how it all started.” We sat out under the stars that night, and my mother told me all sorts of stories. She was serious about it, too. She’d tell them slow, repeating parts as she went, as if she expected me to remember each one.

Early the next morning, the television vans began to arrive, and guys in suits and women in dresses came trotting over to us, dragging microphones and cameras and lights behind them. One of the vans had a table set up with orange juice and sandwiches and fruit. It was for the crew, but when I told them we hadn’t eaten for a while, a really skinny blonde woman told us we could eat as much as we wanted.

They mostly talked to my mother. Every so often one of the reporters would come over and ask me questions about how it felt to be without a country. I told them we had a nice house on the reserve and that my cousins had a couple of horses we rode when we went fishing. Some of the television people went over to the American border, and then they went to the Canadian border.

Around noon, a good-looking guy in a dark suit and an orange tie with little ducks on it drove up in a fancy car. He talked to my mother for a while, and, after they were done talking, my mother called me over, and we got into our car. Just as my mother started the engine, Mel came over and gave us a bag of peanut brittle and told us that justice was a hard thing to get, but that we shouldn’t give up.

I would have preferred lemon drops, but it was nice of Mel anyway.

“Where are we going now?”

“Going to visit Laetitia.”

The guard who came out to our car was all smiles. The television lights were so bright they hurt my eyes, and, if you tried to look through the windshield in certain directions, you couldn’t see a thing.

“Morning, ma’am.”

“Good morning.”

“Where you heading?”

“Salt Lake City.”

“Purpose of your visit?”

“Visit my daughter.”

“Any tobacco, liquor, or firearms?”

“Don’t smoke.”

“Any plants or fruits?”

“Not any more.”

“Citizenship?”

“Blackfoot.”

The guard rocked back on his heels and jammed his thumbs into his gun belt. “Thank you,” he said, his fingers patting the butt of the revolver. “Have a pleasant trip.”

My mother rolled the car forward, and the television people had to scramble out of the way. They ran alongside the car as we pulled away from the border, and, when they couldn’t run any farther, they stood in the middle of the highway and waved and waved and waved.

We got to Salt Lake City the next day. Laetitia was happy to see us, and, that first night, she took us out to a restaurant that made really good soups. The list of pies took up a whole page. I had cherry. Mom had chocolate. Laetitia said that she saw us on television the night before and, during the meal, she had us tell her the story over and over again.

Laetitia took us everywhere. We went to a fancy ski resort. We went to the temple. We got to go shopping in a couple of large malls, but they weren’t as large as the one in Edmonton, and Mom said so.

After a week or so, I got bored and wasn’t at all sad when my mother said we should be heading back home. Laetitia wanted us to stay longer, but Mom said no, that she had things to do back home and that, next time, Laetitia should come up and visit. Laetitia said she was thinking about moving back, and Mom told her to do as she pleased, and Laetitia said that she would.

On the way home, we stopped at the duty-free shop, and my mother gave Mel a green hat that said “Salt Lake” across the front. Mel was a funny guy. He took the hat and blew his nose and told my mother that she was an inspiration to us all. He gave us some more peanut brittle and came out into the parking lot and waved at us all the way to the Canadian border.

* * *

It was almost evening when we left Coutts. I watched the border through the rear window until all you could see were the tops of the flagpoles and the blue water tower, and then they rolled over a hill and disappeared.