Knots, Map, Water, Oranges
By Rebecca Balcárcel

It was spring of 1994, a fresh and moist time of year in the Southwest, when my husband and I set out. Three months pregnant and not particularly in shape, I began a trip from Houston to Santa Fe by bicycle. It took thirty-two days and a resolve to "live deliberately," as Thoreau says. With pages torn from a road atlas, a tent, water bottles, backpacks of food, and a change of clothes, we pedaled out of town. What couldn't fit on bike racks, we left behind. We sold furniture, awkward wedding presents, gave away clothes, dishes, and appliances. My wedding dress went to my parents' closet; my husband's music trophies went to his parents' shelves. We climbed out of our former lives, determined to see who we were.

Square knots: The foundation of our moving home was the square knot. I quickly learned the difference between the lopsided granny and the flat, self-tightening square. One meant stops to re-tie slipping sleep bags or a listing tent roll. The other provided a secure and balanced load that could withstand railroad tracks, shoulder gravel, and a half-hour lean against the wall of a town grocery. The trick to a square knot is fairness. As with good sex, each string takes its turn on top, then underneath.

Every morning we rolled the tent, rolled camping mattresses, stuffed sleeping bags into their sacks, and tied each set to a bike. We found the same soilish-smelling brown twine available at roadside stores all along our route. It cost little enough to simply cut each evening, and withstood enough punishment to last a full day. I now associate knotting twine with a sense of expectancy. I helped knot in the growing light of mornings, on a full stomach of oranges and cheese. Each day we rose out of the grass, breakfasted, and began this ritual. Two knots for each piece of equipment, six knots for each bike. Instead of joining and fastening, knotting came to mean clean breaks -- with the park, campground, or rest stop we had lighted in the night before, with the home we had left behind, with old

expectations. Knotting happened at the moment of goodbye, but it meant no regrets.

Of course, one cannot break with everything, anything maybe. One can leave a piece of land, cart the body miles away, and still live in the past's grip. I felt so tied into my world that I needed a complete hiatus to sort out what was real and what was overlay. I knew that the series of selves I had lived did not form a whole. I knew that the knots holding my life together had slipped.

Map: We followed little red lines. At each dot we stopped for water and food. A few towns had no dot, but still offered a roadside store with one shelf of dry cereal and cashews. I sent my parents a postcard from a town whose post office served as city hall and grocery.

We discovered that almost every Texas town has a Dairy Queen on its red line. We drank shakes at every one between Bremen and Amarillo. I was gladdened by those towns after thirty miles of open road and silence. As a couple of cars and a few signs came into view, a certain relaxation took hold; we entered a safety net. After six hours of pedaling by ourselves, I smiled at the new faces. But after slurping up the last drops of ice cream, I was glad to leave. All pick-up trucks and no library -- these seemed like places to escape from.

The map's red lines offered a clear path. Without fail we woke with a sense of direction. Every day we accomplished something. I didn't think about my dropping out of college, about the scholarship my husband rejected, about jobs or about money. I lived from left foot to right foot. One pedal, the other. A hill became a concentration exercise: left, right, left, right. Success was reaching the top, and the long coast down was reward enough, reason enough to be alive.

Water: The baby grew, floating in his portable home. I left my jeans next to a dumpster and stradled my bike in a denim dress with an empire waistline. One day I felt a brushstroke inside, almost like a feather or a wingtip. I grew heavy, but felt light, propelled by promise.

Drinking water for two adults weighed more than the tent and sleep gear put together. Only a new jar of peanut butter weighed more than a full water bottle. We filled our bottles in restrooms, usually, and once in a remote trailer's yard. We traveled dry that entire morning; the town marked on the map never appeared. I toiled up a long hill, stopping for a break half-way up, walking the bike for several minutes. Not a car in sight. I clicked to the lowest gear and pedaled, each full circle pushing the bike imperceptively forward. Stopping not an option. As I crested the hill, the trailer came into view, relieving the one prick of fear I had yet felt. We coasted into the yard and knocked on the door. A woman in a floral-print housedress proudly showed us her well. Water gushed from her hose like liquid sunlight, like beauty itself, or love, pouring into our mouths. Water. Quenched thirst. Life, that simple.

We bathed in sinks. I splashed water on my arms and wiped a damp paper towel across my neck. I carried a comb. No make-up, no creams. No toners or razors. I stopped washing my hair in Lampasas, Texas; it looked fine. Day three of unwashed hair looks the same as day twenty. I dabbed baking soda under my arms and headed out.

Sinks served as laundromats, too, with a little soap and sloshing. Underwear dries within a few hours; socks take a full night. Jeans are not worth washing unless it's a warm day; then they can dry on your body. I hung everything outdoors on the soil-scented twine stretched between tent rods. My days had become stretched threads, lean and taut enough to sing.

Oranges: We peeled them with our hands. My right thumb nail looked orange on one side, even after washing. I ate oranges on asphalt shoulders, in patches of grass at picnic stops, or inside the tent, warm with a night of our breathing. An orange was cheap, light, healthy, and luscious. It didn't squish or bruise in a backpack; it provided liquid and lasted several days with no special care. An orange stood for the miraculous, a splash of sweetness in the West Texas desert.

The scent of oranges is mild, but a little-used road leaves the air clean enough for it to last several miles on the hands. I was still inhaling orange one afternoon when I heard a distant pattering. It grew louder, and we stopped. Soon a group of deer bounded across the road, followed by an entire herd – a stream of antlers and hooves flowing across our path, only yards away. The last deer stopped and looked our direction, sniffing the air, then disappeared into the brush. Sometimes nature peels back, shows you the miracle.

The ritual of eating took only minutes, with little preparation, no dishes, and no cooking. So we read by flashlight in the evenings, after filling our stomachs and wiping our hands on the dish towel. We read books about spirit, books with long hair and mandalas on their shirts. Books that peeled off our assumptions, tore unneeded customs, cracked rigid ideas, and revealed the sweet flesh of the real.

When we arrived in Santa Fe, we asked directions to the National Forest. We camped illegally in the woods all summer, near a stream, below towering pines. I washed clothes there and laid them on boulders to dry. I wrote during the hot part of each day, read books on childbirth and parenting in the town library, found a midwife. My husband took a job, and by the end of August, we rented an apartment. Indeed, we now lived in a place apart -- apart from woods and wind and changing light. We spent time apart, too, after thirty-something days of togetherness. We re-entered society, in most ways, had a baby, and went back to cooking and showering. However, the outward journey turned out to be an inward one as well, and as I walked about flipping light switches and scrambling eggs on an electric stove, I carried the square knots, the map, water, and oranges.