

*A Backpack,
a Eurorail Pass,
&
Some Serious Baggage*

Jennie Withers

Author's Note:

Travelers, like writers, believe in the power of setting. Before this trip through Europe with my friends Jeanne and Bert, my setting had always been conservative, small town Idaho. I absolutely had to leave that environment and the people insulating me in order to gain perspective of the world and myself. Maybe most importantly, without this journey, I don't think I ever would have revealed or dealt with my abuse. With the help and support of Jeanne and Bert, I found a voice in Europe.

A Backpack, a Eurorail Pass and Some Serious Baggage is over twenty years of work. I've started and stopped writing it many times and revised the manuscript more than I can count. It was very difficult for me to put myself out there this much.

Bert and Jeanne have been involved and passed off on this project. Theirs are the only names that haven't been changed. To this day, they are my rocks.

What I hope to accomplish with *A Backpack, a Eurorail Pass and Some Serious Baggage* is an honest account of a young woman's struggle to get to a place where she can run unabashedly through the pages of her story.

Chapter 1

England doesn't put its past in museums or rope it off into National Landmarks; history is merely assumed into daily life. (Let's Go Europe 1994, pg. 339)

I flopped onto the pepto pink bed in the pastel pink bedroom I shared with Bert. It was time to get down to the business of writing postcards. Despite my best efforts to remain apart from Idaho, there were times I had to reconnect. I was rooted in a religious, rural Idaho town whose population was less than a thousand. In my experience, small towns could be peaceful, nurturing, and cruel.

I left the United States and it wasn't to trudge door to door begging for converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, more commonly known as Mormons. Going on a mission for the church was the only credible reason for an unmarried twenty-two-year-old woman to leave the country according to the folks back home in Paterson.

I dealt the postcards I carefully chose on outings to Leeds Castle and National Gallery onto the bed. Filling them would be particularly tedious that day because it was another reminder that I was running out of time. My semester in London was over. My classmates from various colleges in the Northwest were headed home. My only consolation was that I still had another month of freedom traveling with Bert and Jeanne. Bert had been with me from the beginning, but Jeanne would be arriving for this phase of the adventure the next day.

I hoped my studies abroad program and subsequent travels would provide the freedom I needed to discover not only who I was, but who I wanted to be. The Mormon paradigm was all I'd ever known and self-discovery was not exactly encouraged. The belief that I needed to leave became clear when I saw the studies abroad pamphlet in the Boise State University Student Union. I even came up with three official rules for my time away: *1) Be Worldly, 2) No Guilt! 3) Discover the perfect pint of ale.* So here I was, living with a London family, attending school at the University of London, running amuck in England with an Eskimo named Bert, and living by my own rules, not my family's, and certainly not the church's.

I would start with the postcard for my grandparents. Mission or not, they were proud of me. I described Leeds Castle and the maze behind it where I got hopelessly lost. The frustration was well worth it when I made it to the exquisite sea themed grotto in the middle. Gram liked stories of triumph after tribulation, particularly mine. I was, after all, her favorite. I was the oldest grandchild and the closest to her in every way. "Queen Bee" was one of the many nicknames she had for me.

I closed with most of the pertinent information; I was eating well, learning a lot, missed them, loved them and signed it, Jennie Gal. There was really only one thing I left out that I knew Gram wanted to know. I couldn't bring myself to write that I was getting down on my knees next to the bed and saying my prayers every night. The protection prayer provided was one of the many pre-travel lectures I received from Gram. I supposed it would have been easy to include that little tidbit on my postcards, but I didn't. I had never been a liar.

I was about to start on my Aunt Steph's postcard when the phone rang, two vigorous rings followed by a pause then two more rings. Every call in England sounded urgent. Knowing my home-stay family was in bed, and Bert was probably asleep in front of the TV, I slid my five eleven frame off my five foot nothing bed and scrambled down the stairs. I glanced into the living room as I reached for the phone and saw that Bert was indeed laid out on the couch.

I had known Bert since my Freshman year at Mormon owned Ricks College. As a Native Alaskan, she was my first ethnic friend. Rural Idaho is not exactly diverse. Bert was a round faced, brown skinned, Asian eyed, mischievous character whose smile was contagious. I'd never seen her serious side. Until now.

"Hello," I said knowing immediately the crackling airspace meant it was an overseas call.

While she slept, Bert played with her long brightly designed hair wrap like those you get on a beach in Mexico from a woman skilled with embroidery floss. Bert didn't get hers in Mexico, but from her sisters before her mom's funeral.

"Did you hear about Steph and Ray?" My brother asked before I even finished saying hello.

"Hey, Darin. What if someone else answered the phone?"

"I knew it was you. So did you hear about Steph?"

"No, what?" I ran a hand through my not so permed anymore thick brown hair out of frustration with my little brother. Darin knew something juicy. Otherwise he wouldn't be dangling it like a treat he made his dog do tricks for. I wasn't in the mood to perform.

"Quit being a jackass or I'm hanging up."

"Steph and Ray are getting divorced," Darin hurried to say.

"Divorced? Why?"

"The bastard cheated on Steph with his secretary. And she's pregnant."

"Who's pregnant?"

"The secretary, retard."

I rotated the phone so my brother wouldn't hear the deep breath I took which according to my self-help books was supposed to quiet the drummer in my chest and the panic screaming through my brain.

"Jen, you still there?"

"How is she?" I asked.

"Pissed. And get this, Ray's probably screwed other women too, might even be other kids. There's all sorts of shit hittin' the fan. I think Steph should cap him in the nads." There was

barely a pause before Darin changed the subject. “Hey, you got me anything yet? My birthday’s tomorrow you know. Is Jeanne there? Dude, tell her I’m not jailbait anymore and I’m totally available.”

“She comes tomorrow. Tell mom I’ll call,” I said flatly and hung up the phone.

I glanced into the living room. Bert was still dead to the world. She hadn’t heard the conversation. As I climbed the stairs I thought becoming blissfully distracted by my European journey was what I needed. That, and the root cellar.

The root cellar was the place in my head where I locked away my worst memories. It was aptly named because Gram’s pitch black, earth storage room scared the hell out of me. A piece of plywood on hinges groaned open to reveal cement stairs that descended into a damp, dirt walled, acrid smelling, black abyss. Once I threw a memory down into the darkness like a sack of potatoes, I didn’t retrieve it.

Ray was the reason I created the root cellar. I knew it was going to be difficult to keep it locked down. Ray hurt Steph. Something I’d always wanted to prevent.

Steph was my favorite aunt. She taught me to say, “Go jump in the lake!” and “Up your nose with a rubber hose!” when I was two. Much to my mom’s chagrin, they became my go to responses to everything. When I raised a 4-H lamb in fifth grade, she trimmed the bodagots off Beethoven’s butt so he was ready to show. And when she married a charming, nice looking, soon-to-be lawyer named Ray, I was her youngest bridesmaid.

Back in the room, I picked the postcard I chose for Steph off the bed. It was *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*. Of all the people staring from canvasses at the National Gallery, this blindfolded girl kneeling in front of the executioner’s block haunted me the most.

Lady Jane Grey, a devout protestant, was urged to become queen by her family and her religion to prevent the accession of the Catholic, Mary Tudor. Jane was queen for nine days before her family abandoned her and Mary (soon to be known as Bloody Mary) imprisoned her in the Tower of London. Jane was tried for high treason and sentenced to death by beheading. I tossed the card in the trash.

I placed the other postcards on the nightstand and turned off the light, covered up, and pulled my knees to my chest. I might be able to keep out of the root cellar, but there would be no avoiding the what ifs that night. I shut my eyes and my thoughts took over. *What if being a lawyer and Mormon man in a small, predominantly Mormon city made Ray as powerful as I thought it did? What if he took the boys away from Steph? What if I had to tell? What if I got called into the Bishop? What if the Bishop told me to repent? What if Steph blamed me for all of it? What if she didn't believe me? What if she hated me? What if I just stayed out of it? What if Steph didn't need my help? What if Steph didn't want my help? What if Steph shot Ray in the balls? What if I did?*

The various answers to these questions played out in my imagination, or in my short, but intense, anxiety dreams. Bert never came to bed so at first light, I got up and opened the curtains. The dull gray of the London morning was there.

I sat on the floor next to the radiator and wrote a sunny description of the last class party overlooking Brighton's white cliffs in my journal, and then read from my English History book which read more like a soap opera than a textbook. When I heard voices coming from Eric and Liz's bedroom, I showered and got ready to meet Jeanne at Victoria Station.

As I walked up the hill to the Rayner's Lane Tube station, I was rather sentimental. The semester was over and so was my claim to Rayner's Lane. It really had become my home. The

shops in the timber framed buildings were part of my daily routine. There was the café where Bert and I liked to get a cup of Postum and a scone before catching the train to school. Just up from that was the neighborhood pub, a small convenience store, and the post office where the postmistress knew me by name.

I was not quite so sentimental about the Tube. I boarded a train and realized I truly hated London's subway that day, and not just because of the stale air mixed with a variety of dirty odors that created the black boogers I blew from my nose after a Tube trip. It was the quiet. Only the socially inept or obnoxious American tourists talked above a whisper on the Tube. My favorite hobby, eavesdropping, wasn't possible so I'd brought my juicy history book.

Before reading, I looked to see if Miss Idaho Lovely Lips was in my car. She was. This time she launched her dirt bike off a mountain peak and sailed shiny lips first at observers. Advertisements for Blistex plastered inside Tube cars provided the only knowledge Londoners had about Idaho. They featured a female daredevil named Miss Idaho Lovely Lips who, despite the dangerous activities she participated in, always had great looking lips. The one I'd stolen after a pub crawl with my literature professor and classmates featured Miss Idaho Lovely Lips riding atop an airplane.

The advertisers had gotten one thing right. Vast landscapes were the backdrop for the glossy lipped adventurer. I missed being able to jump in a car, on a motorcycle, snowmobile, or bike and in a few minutes be the only person on earth. For now, I would have to settle for having my own seat on a Saturday morning Tube ride.

My luck changed when I switched trains at South Kensington. I found a seat on the packed Tube next to an older woman in a turquoise slicker and a neon purple hat. Londoners

seemed to compensate for their dreary skies through their wardrobes and home décor. The woman nodded in greeting as I sat. Idaho Lovely Lips wasn't in my car.

I flipped open my book to a random page to begin reading. Lady Jane Grey was there to meet me. It was the same painting of Lady Jane Grey on the post card I trashed instead of sending to Steph. I felt like the universe was trying to tell me something. *What if I was Lady Jane Grey? What if my family abandoned me? What if I was about to experience an execution of some sort? If so, who would be my executioners?* My guess was the Mormon church.

I flipped to another page, but I couldn't get Lady Jane Grey out of my head. I wished I'd brought my Walkman instead of the book.

When the train stopped, the woman sitting next to me patted my leg before I could make my move toward the exit. "He's not worth it Love," she whispered. "Tell him to sod off, then get pissed and get on with it."

"Thanks." I forced a smile and smoothed down my big hair.

I exited the eerie silence of the Tube into bustling Victoria Station. I was always struck by how utilitarian Victoria Station wasn't. The outside was a grand red brick that was more suitable for the rich and important rather than a train station. Glass ceilings over wide open spaces graced the inside. The British believed they were more refined, more cultured than Americans. Victoria Station seemed to prove they were right.

The board said Jeanne's train should arrive in an hour. It seemed like yesterday I came in on that train. I was excited to have Jeanne back with Bert and me. She would keep the cellar shut and the what ifs at bay.

I mailed my one postcard, paid my ten *p* to pee, and then found a bookstore. Bookstores in London were as prevalent as coffee shops in the states. I loved it. Reading gave me the

opportunity to live in someone else's head for a while which was probably why I chose to be an English major. I wasn't entirely sure what to do with an English degree, but I was succumbing to the idea of being a teacher like my parents.

I browsed through the store's clearance novels. I immediately saw a book with the picture of a women's basketball player on the cover. It was an odd find in London, England where I had yet to see a hoop. I turned it over and read the back. *Mandy Lewis is living her dream. It's her last year of high school. She's the star on an undefeated basketball team, college scouts are paying attention, her friends are solid, and she's dating the hottest guy in school. Mandy's life is going as planned. That is until Lisa comes into the picture. Mandy's attraction to Lisa threatens her game plan. If Mandy and Lisa are together, Mandy may have to sacrifice everything for love.*

I didn't date much. For one thing, there were few options who weren't related to me in Paterson. The most noticeably queer thing for people in my hometown, however, was that I wanted more out of youth than learning to cook, make baby blankets, and embroider on dish towels to put in a hope chest for the prodigious day I was married in the temple and starting on a big family. My refusal to learn how to be a good wife and mother was not only a reflection of my neglectful family, but of my sexuality as well.

I tossed the book onto the pile and went to the travel section. I noted a bright yellow cover belonging to a book called *Let's Go Europe 1994*. On the cover it announced it was written by college students as a guide for young travelers on a budget. Of course, I had to buy it.

Back at the arrivals area, I sat and flipped through the first pages of *Let's Go*. I paused to read about the importance of choosing compatible travel companions. I knew Jeanne, Bert, and I would travel well together. After all, we formed the kind of bond that only outcasts at Ricks College could. Bert was a Catholic who tagged along to Idaho from Alaska with a Mormon

friend. Jeanne was sent to Ricks by her parents to force her on the straight and narrow. And then there was me, a student athlete who arrived determined to keep my mouth closed and my soul open so I wouldn't have to function on borrowed faith any longer. It didn't work. Together we became rebels with a cause to discover who we were despite being immersed in a religion that wanted to define us.

A train rumbled in and squealed to a stop. Passengers poured out and hurried off to various destinations. I quickly located Jeanne in the throng of people. English people were generally known for their propriety, pride, and drinking boat loads of tea. They were not known for their air of carelessness, platinum blonde hair, blue eyes, and dimpled smile that revealed perfect teeth. Jeanne's backpack was slung over her shoulder. Her favorite No Fear hat hung from one of the straps. She wore a well-worn, blue plaid flannel shirt and loose fitting jeans that couldn't hide an athletic build. Jeanne stopped, shoved her hands in the pockets of her jeans and let people file around her.