

Jennifer Humphrey

Choices

30 Dec 1984

Dear Jennifer:

We went on a two week cruise on the MS Noordam. We had a deluxe outside... cabin and it was *deluxe!* I really had a great time...Someone made my bed, turned it back at night and left a mint on my pillow...

How are things in Iowa?

I always get depressed when I read your letters, Liz. I've always wanted to travel the world, and have often imagined myself living in a garrett in Venice, with a window view of the canal and narrow walkways. Or maybe I would be in Hong Kong, milling among the throngs of people—people with hair of polished black silk and chatter like a cacophony of wind chimes. Or perhaps Kenya, where I would feel the searing heat of the sun on my face while hiking across the savannah.

Instead, I turn to gaze upon the farmer across the creek, who is disking his cornfield after the harvest. Back and forth goes the tractor, lumbering slowly, always within the well-defined margins of the field, like a child carefully coloring within the lines. The diskier being pulled behind the tractor is chopping the straw-dry, straw-colored cornstalks into bits, and mixing the bits among the clods of earth. The view is the same this time of year, year after year. How are things in Iowa? They are, well, like things in Iowa.

4 April 1985

We...[went] to Acapulco and the temperatures were in the 90's. We also went to Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlan, Zihuatanejo, Cabo San Lucas...

A sharp, cold wind gusts around the corners of my house. I wonder if the farmer is cold, too. The sky is icy grey like the surface of a frozen lake. From time to time, the wind brings me the low rumble of the tractor.

I remember, Liz, when you applied for the job at Westours. It was in early 1983, when I had come to stay with you for a few days. I had needed your company, the company of my oldest friend. The job opening was for summertime tour-bus drivers in Alaska, transporting people to and from the scenic wonders while providing a running commentary through a microphone ("To your right is the Matanuska Valley...").

I was familiar with those tour bussess, having taken a vacation in Alaska a few years before. I had gone, alone, on the Washington State Ferry from Seattle to

Skagway—a three-and-a-half day trip—then travelled throughout much of Alaska by train and bus, my choice of destination directed only by whim. I was not quite 22 at the time. I took one of those guided bus tours from Anchorage to Portage Glacier and back, and thought it great fun. The patter of the bus driver/tour leader was unfailingly bright and amusing, and the sudden view of the icebergs through the bus window as we rounded the last corner to the lake—each berg sculpted into spires and curves like well-used salt licks, and bobbing in the aching blue of the breeze-riffled water was like *National Geographic* come to life.

You got the job. I had gone home by then, but when I heard, I was happy for you. However, I was concerned also, my once-sheltered and once-diffident friend. You had thought my solo journey through Alaska to be reckless and it worried you. But I was generally comfortable with being alone, and the autonomy and self-reliance it entailed were often exhilarating. And now you had a job which required you to muster much autonomy and self-reliance, a job far away from the constant influence and protection of your family and friends. I wondered how you would fare.

As it turned out, you fared pretty damned well. You thrived in the new soil and became an excellent bus driver and tour leader. You were readily trusted on your own with the transportation, care, and entertainment of successive bus loads of people, even on trips lasting several days and several hundred miles. And it was the perfect set-up: You worked summers in Alaska, collecting hefty paychecks, tips, and bonuses, and had your winters to yourself to finish college back in Washington; after you graduated, winters went for travel and relaxation. Following two seasons as a driver, the company sent you on a free 14-day cruise to Mexico as a gift for faithful service rendered.

4 April 1985

I think I will enjoy art history I already thumbed through the book and identified all the pieces I have seen in real life. It was kind of fun to know that I saw these things at the Louvre & the Prado etc. ...

Will you stay in Iowa? How much longer will it take to get your degree?

At least I, too, had been to the Louvre and the Prado. Our trip to Europe in late 1983 was the only time I have ever journeyed beyond the borders of America and Canada, the first and last time I was able to reach out for some of the other-land exotica I have longed for all my life. England, Ireland, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, etc.—we saw them all. And what a time we had! The memories are a kaleidoscope of color: the silver and gold, diamond, ruby, and emerald of the Crown Jewels; the gaudy whirl of Christmas fairs in Bavaria; the pale, clear yellow of beer in the Hofbrau Haus; the pure, white floss—like spun pearls—of

Humphrey

the lace-makers in Venice; the shimmering sunset colors of the autumn leaves at Versailles.

Within a year after our return, I packed my belongings in my old green Dodge and drove from Florida—my home at the time—to Iowa State University, filled with a new fire for education. Bachelor's degree or bust!

24 Oct 1985

Do you ...realize it has been 2 years since we were in Europe! ...

I had a good summer... I drove from Anchorage to Fairbanks, Anc. to Valdez, Valdez to Tok and Tok to Whitehorse & Skagway... I drove an average of 300 miles a day & I can still feel it in my back and neck!!

I think I will probably...do some travelling [next year]

...My friend Sharon who will also be a 4th year driver is interested in doing some travelling also and she went to Europe last year so she might be interested in going someplace more exotic. . . .

How is Iowa...? I think of you often—especially this time of year as this is when we were in Europe. Let me know how school is going I hope all is well.

There were occasions, and not few, when I feared the bachelor's degree was going to break me—mentally, physically, and financially. I struggled mightily with my courses and my bills. Having avoided hard science and mathematics during my previous exchanges with education, and now having chosen a scientific field—geology—to go into, I had to begin at the proverbial square one. Logarithms? What were those? Quantum mechanics? Huh? I started with high-school level geometry and algebra, and battled my way up through university courses in chemistry, calculus, and physics. I worked at part-time jobs and took out educational loans. All my money went for school and bare living expenses. I shared a room in the dorm and ate my food out of cans.

2 April 1986

This will be my 4th season driving a bus. I will be in Anchorage again. Last summer I started working for a new company called Royal Hyway Tours—they are a division of Princess Tours. They paid me 3rd year salary last year even though it was my first year with them and this year I will make 4th year salary... With bonuses (if I receive them & I always have) ...imagine how far I could travel...

The farmer is rumbling by on another-straight line pass through his field. Yet another narrow phalanx of dry cornstalks, standing and rattling their dry bones in the wind, is about to be laid to rest.

Liz, I remember when you and I used to work in the soggy mountains of western Washington as laborers for the Young Adult Conservation Corps. That's where we first met. We were on the same work crew and lived on the same floor in the dorm. You were only 18, and retained vestiges of the shyness of childhood. I was barely 21, and brash and outspoken. Everyone I worked with, including you, referred to young adult females as "girls." I seldom let an instance go by without vigorously offering correction. Soon, you saw the belittlement implied by the common application of the word for children when speaking of adults, and you, too, began saying "women" instead. Some people saw me as pushy and abrasive. I saw myself as a strong-minded go-getter, not willing to take any crap from anyone, determined to never settle for less than the best I could achieve. Determined to never give up on my dreams for the future.

Of us two, I was the first to be promoted: I had become an assistant supervisor for the training crew. As such, I helped to educate new hires in the use of conservation handtools, such as shovels, axes, and adz hoes, as well as chainsaws. Shortly thereafter, you were promoted also—to assistant supervisor of the grounds crew. There was little glamour in that. The mission of grounds crew—to care for the lawns, trees, and flower beds around the administrative buildings and dormitories—was snickered at and derided by those of us who worked far afield in the forests and mountains maintaining hiking trails, constructing campsites, and cutting down trees for improving visibility along mountain roads. But even without the cachet of prestige, you saw to it that there was never a patch of grass left unmowed, a scatter of leaves left unraked, or a flower bed left unweeded. I don't know why I ever doubted that you would be anything less than a solid success at your present job.

Still, I remember when we attended van-driving class, a requirement that had to be met before being allowed to operate the 15-passenger crew vans. The class was a colossal bore, with the instructor droning on for hours about such critical matters as stopping to look and listen at all railroad crossings, checking the fan belt and vital fluids every day, and the proper distance from the vehicle to place emergency reflectors when changing a flat. Most of us managed to stay at least ostensibly awake, in a state of semi-hypnosis, only really slipping off into slumberland for a few moments now and again, then spasmodically leaping back to consciousness with a bob and jerk of the head, blinking with embarrassment and hoping no one had noticed.

But you—oh, my. The class lasted for four days and you spent every one of them sound asleep. I would turn around from time to time to look at you with your head resting on your arms on the table, your face toward me, the cheek against your sleeve squashed like Silly Putty, mouth gaping open. You weren't purposefully disrespectful to the instructor—it was just that the sensory depriva-

Humphrey

tion was too profound to be resisted.

It was no different on the last day of van class, when we actually went out for some practical experience. The class was divided into two groups and herded into separate vans. We all each took turns driving around the compound, past the well-tended lawns and trees and flowers. Occasionally, I caught a glimpse of you in the other van, neck bowed, the left side of your face smooshed against the glass of one of the windows, blonde hair falling across your forehead, dead to the world as long as you weren't at the wheel.

But I guess sleeping through van class didn't do you any harm after all.

2 April 1986

I'm hoping to do some travelling with Sharon...to some real far off ports! ...Maybe Australia & New Zealand...

My love life on the other hand is not going real well. It seems like the same old story, the guys I'm interested in always have girlfriends & the ones interested in me I wish weren't!... I am not too anxious to find someone but my grandfather & sister still tease me about when am I going to find a boyfriend & get married etc.

The August before my junior year in college, when the air was thick with humidity, I met David. I couldn't bear the dorm anymore—the cramped quarters, the incessant noise, the lack of easy personal access to cooking facilities—and I had been looking for an apartment. I knew I would have to pay a higher rent than in the dorm, but my continued sanity demanded a change. I responded to a roommate-wanted ad in the newspaper and discovered a spacious, quiet, two-bedroom apartment with wall-to-wall carpeting, modern appliances, and large south-facing windows which allowed the rooms to fill with light. There was even a brick fireplace and a deck, both adding a touch of unexpected luxury. The view through the sliding glass doors leading out to the deck was of a creek sparsely lined with small trees, and just beyond, a low hillside clothed in rows of corn—a pattern like plush, green corduroy. I would no longer have to look at a parking lot, blacktopped streets, and crowded lines of buildings from my window. Instead, I could gaze out at the serenity of the verdant billows of corn.

As late summer turned to fall, I also grew fonder and fonder of my new roommate. Before winter descended with its blankets of snow and bellicose winds, we were sleeping together.

19 Dec 1986

...I got another cruise [to Mexico]. I left Dec. 6 ...on the Pacific Princess ("The Love Boat")! I really had a good time—I stayed up too late, drank too

much & lost money gambling!! I ...[met] an interesting Blackjack dealer ... and spent some time with him but we didn't have much more in common than a bit of physical attraction... So you have a new man in your life—I want to hear all about him! Would you send a few good men my way!

In contrast to my exhausting labors to develop a meaningful relationship with my calculus book, my affection for David flourished easily. When we went to Baltimore for two weeks—to spend the Christmas holidays with his parents and siblings—my emotional need for him hit me between the eyes like a wrecking ball. Once, I had relished my solitude and independence. This occasion I cried nearly the whole time he was gone.

19 Dec 1986

My mother had a hysterectomy in October and I stayed home to take care of the house, take Brooks & Sarah to various appointments etc., etc. Remind me never to become a housewife or a *house* anything!!

...Starting in January... I will be doing driver training...[This will last] for 3 to 4 months... I will teach students to drive a bus! The guy that is in charge of driver training asked me to train new drivers. ...I have the most driving experience and ...will be on ...my own. I'd run my own show which should be fun...

I remember once, Lize, some years ago, when you told me you had expected to marry young and end up a housewife in Anytown, America, driving a station wagon full of kids down the tree-lined streets in suburbia. Funny how things turn out, isn't it?

5 Nov 1987

...I'm on my way to New Zealand & Australia I leave on Nov. 12... I am travelling with my friend Sharon...

My friend Denise & I are already thinking about travelling together next fall. We have some friends that are...in the Orient this year & we are getting some ideas from them.

I remember from your last letter that you will be done with school...this next year. Do you have any big plans when you get out of school?...

How's the love life?! I certainly hope it is going as well as in your last letter. Things are not too exciting in mine. I dated a guy last spring for awhile but we had different interests & it really didn't last... We ran out of things to talk about & it didn't seem worth the effort to try harder...

My parents have given up on me. They think I'll never settle down, get

Humphrey

married & have 2 cars in the garage—but what they don't know is I don't care right now! Maybe someday but right now I'm enjoying every minute of what I'm doing!

Well I'm off on my adventure & I'll send you a card somewhere along the line.

Yes I finally graduated, and “with highest distinction.” Then I started work on a master's degree. I'd had my heart set on getting my master's from a more prestigious institution, but I couldn't leave Iowa just then. David was still working on his Ph. D., so I began graduate school right where I was. A good, solid program, yes, but it didn't have quite the cachet of Cornell or Penn State.

Another harvest came and went

30 Nov 1987

We have been in New Zealand for over 2 weeks now & are really having a good time... I could spend months here I really like it. The South Island... is very much like Washington & Alaska. It is very green & there are jagged mountains & glaciers on the west coast... What a great place! You would love it in N.A. it really is...beautiful ...

18 April 1988

...We went back to Sydney & immediately flew to Cairns up on the northeast coast. It was hot & sunny & we loved every minute of it. . . . We went snorkling on the great barrier reef...One [other] day...we went swimming in an old volcano cone. You couldn't tell it was an old volcano it just looked like a mtn. lake but the water wasn't cold...From Cairns we went to Brisbane & spent 3 days there. We rented a car for 2 of those days & drove north one day & south the next. The steering wheel was on the right & and they drive on the left side of the road.

Today I drove east to the supermarket and then west to return home. The steering wheel was on the left and I drove on the right side of the road. I didn't see any glaciers, reefs, or volcano-cone lakes. Instead, I saw cornfields and farmhouses, canned pears and frozen cod.

18 April 1988

I am an Anchorage driver trainer...I can set my own schedule etc. ...[When I first arrived for the season], I stayed in the Captain Cook hotel—4 stars very nice...

I thought that I'd be bored [this year, so]...I decided to entertain myself by taking flying lessons!...My flight instructor says that I am above average so far... We have been doing straight & level flight, turns, touch and go's...& have even done some stalls (this is where you cut the power to the engine to where it stalls then to regain power you almost do a dive & push the power on to full). For some reason these don't bother me.

I remember when you and I tried skydiving, now so long ago. With four other friends, we each paid \$50 for two days of jump school, which was to conclude with each of us taking our first jump. I was great at the preliminaries leading up to that first jump: I quickly learned how to do a perfect four-point land-and-roll. For much of the morning of the second day, in the brilliant, pale sunshine beating down on the tiny airport just south of the Canadian border, we all repeatedly took turns leaping from a six-foot-high metal box. We were told that the impact when we hit the ground was similar to that when landing at the conclusion of a parachute jump. So over and over, we each sprang from the top of that yellow-painted metal box to practice land-and-roll: first the feet strike the ground, then the body folds sideways so that one knee, hip, and shoulder hit the earth in smooth, quick succession. The idea was to prevent injury by absorbing the shock—many beginning skydivers break their ankles and the like when they strike the ground after an otherwise acceptable jump, due to poor landing technique.

But you never could get quite right. Instead of feet, knee, hip, shoulder, for you it was feet, knee, backside. Or feet, knees, hands. Your landings were funny, but worrisome.

Soon it was time to put on jumpsuits and parachutes. After my main chute had been positioned on my back—the straps passing over my shoulders and under my crotch—and cinched tight, and the smaller emergency reserve chute had been positioned on my chest and likewise cinched down hard, I felt as if my torso were being compressed vertically like a Slinky toy, as if someone were trying to make me permanently shorter than I was meant to be. Then the heavy metal helmet was put on my head and the chinstrap was pulled tight, seemingly fusing my lower jaw to my upper. After we were all similarly equipped, we tottered stiffly toward two small airplanes parked on the blacktop near the runway. A pilot was already at the controls of each. A jumpmaster climbed in beside, into the right front passenger's seat. Three of us novices clambered into the cramped back of each plane, where there were no seats, only a bare floor to kneel on. There was little extra space. You were nearest the fall wall, I was in the middle, and James, a mutual friend of ours, was next to the door. Our jumpmaster—a small, thin man with wiry red hair and splotchy freckles—closed the door and the plane began to move, turning onto the runway. The moment of truth was rapidly bearing down upon us.

Humphrey

I had never been up in an airplane before, and then there I was, planning to jump from one. I was afraid, but I had swallowed the fear somewhere deep inside, and on the surface all I felt was an unnatural calm. The plane sped down the runway, lifted off, and climbed and climbed. I tried to see out the windows, but it was hard while sitting on the floor. Soon we leveled off.

When the plane was nearly ready to begin its first pass over the field we were to jump into, the jumpmaster—Bill, I think, was his name—opened the door and spoke to James, who obediently placed one foot outside onto the wheel strut and pushed it down the length of the metal bar until it touched the side of the wheel, as we had been taught. He placed one hand on the wing strut and pulled himself outside. The cloth of his jumpsuit was flapping wildly in the rushing wind. We had been told that the wind would be of similar strength to that outside a car moving at 50 m.p.h. James assumed the pre-jump position: spread-eagled outside the plane, both hands now on the wing strut, both feet on the wheel strut.

Beginning jumpers do not themselves pull the cord for their own chutes. The cord is instead attached to a bar inside the door of the plane via a woven length of high-tensile cloth, called a static line. When the jumper releases his hold on the plane, and falls, the chute is pulled by the jumper's own weight when he reaches the end of the static line, some tens of feet below the plane.

I knew all of this, but I was not prepared for the tremendous jolt to the plane when the static line did its work. While James was still holding on, waiting for Bill to indicate when he should let go, I was told to inch up beside the door, as I would be next. I found myself, sitting on my heels, just to the rear of the wide-open airplane door. My face was only a few inches from that howling rectangular opening in space.

"Now!" bellowed the jumpmaster, and James was gone. Only blue sky remained where he had been. And then, almost instantly, it happened: James reached the end of his static line. The plane was convulsively wrenched to one side by the sudden jerk of his weight. The pilot quickly and matter-of-factly compensated and re-leveled the craft, but, for a second, I had been sitting on the immediate edge of an abyss at the bottom of which the green of pastures far below had swung nauseatingly into view, then quickly swung away again. The plane had dipped momentarily so far to one side that the opening in the side of the plane had seemed to become an opening in the floor, which I had felt myself sucked toward.

At that instant, my numbness shattered with a resounding crash. I felt a terror more pure than I had ever felt before or have ever felt since. Other times when I have been afraid, the fear has always been tangled and knotted with other emotions—anger, guilt, frustration. But at that moment, I felt terror and nothing else.

"Your turn next," said Bill, twisting around in his seat and looking at me. I

stared back at him, eyes round, mouth open.

“Your turn,” he repeated. “As soon as we finish circling back.”

I responded that I could not go just yet, or some words of the sort. I asked you if you would mind going next instead. Your eyes, too, were big with fear, and the skin of your face seemed stretched a little too tight, but as I backed away from the open door, you crawled past me and into position. On Bill’s signal, during the plane’s second pass over the field, you lifted yourself out of the plane and onto the struts. And when he said “Now,” you vanished. The plane again jerked violently to one side, but not with quite as much force as before. James, after all, was 6’7” and well over 200 pounds. Your weight was about half of his and didn’t pack quite the punch.

And then it was my turn again. It was now or never. I was the only jumper left in the plane. The pilot circled over the field for the third and last time.

“Put your foot out,” I was told. I pushed my right foot out through the door and fought to keep it from being blown backward, away from the wheel strut. I was surprised and appalled at the force of the wind. Finally, I got the foot onto the strut and slid it down to the wheel. I put my right hand out on the wing strut and gripped. The other hand was clamped onto the edge of the doorjamb, and the other leg was still inside the plane. I was half inside and half outside, clinging to the frame of an airplane at 3000 feet in the air. And that was as far as I got.

I looked out toward the horizon, and down, way down toward the green serenity of the Washington countryside, even though I knew I wasn’t supposed to. I recalled having been told that if the chute doesn’t open properly, there are only 18 seconds for the problem to be alleviated before the body hits the ground at an unforgiving velocity. We had learned this our first day of jump school, impressing upon us the extreme importance of acting quickly and calmly in the case of an emergency. There are various problems that a jumper can have with equipment during a jump, and, depending on the problem, there are an array of measures that can be taken to save one’s self. But at this point I knew that, in my terror, I would not have the presence of mind to do anything in the case of equipment difficulties. I would fall, paralyzed to my death. Problems were not likely, but they could happen, and I would be completely unable to respond.

Worse still, I feared that my fear, in itself, could kill me. I was deeply anxious that, even if the parachute worked perfectly, letting go of an airplane at 3000 feet and falling toward the distant earth would cause my heart to stop from sheer overwhelming panic. Every neuron in my body was poised to send a jolt of killing shock directly to the center of my being if I were to find myself flailing alone in the sun-shot air more than half a mile above the surface of the planet.

“Go the rest of the way out,” Bill commanded.

I turned my face toward his. Had I been the first jumper in line, had the

Humphrey

horrifying jolt of James's static line not ripped from me my self-spun cocoon of calm, I might have been able to complete the jump. But now, I shook my head.

"I want to come back in," I shouted above the roar of the wind and the engine. Bill reached out an arm for me and helped pull me back inside. Then he closed the door. I huddled against the far wall and kept my eyes averted from the windows. As we headed back toward the airport, I considered with a cold horror that nothing but a few inches of fragile metal separated me from the awful nothingness outside. For the first time in my existence, life felt very flimsy.

Back on the ground, I was filled with shame. Everyone else had jumped and they were chattering excitedly about the breathtaking fun of it all. You had finally managed a four-point landing—feet, knees, chest, face—but were none the worse for it.

Looking back now, I see that day as something of a fork in the road for us. Since the beginning our friendship, we had traveled closely up to that point, then you went one way and I another. We each learned different things at that fork. I learned caution in the face of danger. My youthful impression of the impregnability of life was smashed forever—I had come to understand in one blinding instant how easily life could be crushed. The comprehension of mortality as referring *to me* was spectacularly brought home while I looked upon the ground from that dreadful unnatural distance. Had the plane been going to crash and death certain if I didn't jump, I would have leaped straight out the door without a second's pause. But I was not willing to risk my life in the name of recreation.

And you, what did you learn? You learned to take a risk; to plunge right in, alone and unaided; to push ahead and not look back. To jump from an airplane is a decision that one makes in supreme isolation, no matter how many other people are present; and to have jumped, and be suddenly loose in the column of air above the earth, to see the airplane speeding away into the distance, must give birth to an unimaginable aloneness. It is a situation in which life may depend more on self-reliance than ever before.

18 April 1988

I am trying to decide where I want to go this year! I should have the money but I may not have a travelling companion. You have to get out of school soon so you can go with me!...

I am writing this letter to you on the Alaskan ferry Taku. I am taking one of our company vans down to Ketchikan where I will also be doing some training...I put the van on the ferry last night [at Skagway] at 6:00 p. & will get to Ketchikan tonite at 11:30. We are between Petersburg & Wrangell now.

And I am between a farm creek and a vacant lot. I cannot travel with you. I don't have the money, and I couldn't leave David. I need him. Yet I yearn to travel, as I always have. My emotions are being pulled from both ends, like taffy. I imagine your voice echoing across the cornfields to me, calling my name from somewhere far away, perhaps Mexico, being carried on the wind from a beach in Acapulco. I can even hear the warm cerulean water as it rushes in low waves toward your feet.

But then the sounds of you are replaced by the rumble of farm machinery. The tractor is kicking up dust now, and the wind is grabbing hold and flinging it in plumes across the field. I wonder why the farmer disks after the harvest. The chocolate-rich earth is blowing away, leaving dead sand behind.

1 Jan 1989

I was excited to hear that you may be getting married. That's great! I wouldn't mind being married one of these days but I haven't found anyone very interesting. Somehow the ones I'm not interested in manage to find me. That's life I guess. I love weddings—let me know what happens.

What happened was David and I were married, on a rare cool day in July. I wore a lacy white dress, he wore a rented dark suit. Many of our friends were there, as well as David's two brothers. After the wedding, we had a lovely reception in a local restaurant. There was plenty of food, champagne and cake. I wish you could've been there also, but you were working in Alaska.

10 July 1989

Congratulations! I wish I could come to the wedding unfortunately its hard to get away. Its been so long since I've seen you...

I am now in charge of all the drivers. It's fun & I still love being here. Congrats again & best wishes.

**Lots of love,
Liz**

David and I went to Minnesota for a one-week honeymoon. I can foresee no time when we will be able to travel much farther afield. When David finishes his Ph.D., it will be time for him to think of a career. And when he is firmly settled in with a monthly salary, health and accident insurance, and a pension plan, he may receive all of two weeks vacation per year. Two weeks a year—a teasingly, tauntingly short time. Just long enough to get a bare taste of what lies beyond these borders—these borders of America; of 9-to-5 life; of the stultifying, conventional

Humphrey

existence we are in danger of adopting. I am afraid.

I look out the window once again, yearning to see a piazza in the heart of Rome, with an elaborate fountain at its center. I want to see Italians and tourists milling about, colorfully dressed for a warm, sunny day. An grey-haired old lady in a flower-print dress will be sitting on a stone bench with a small boy in short pants. They will be casting birdseed onto the brick pavement, feeding a flock of eager pigeons. . . .

The tractor is gone. The farmer has completed his task. The edges of his field are as straight as yardsticks, never wavering, never violated. Somehow, Liz, you ended up with the life I had always expected to have, and I ended up with yours. I was the one who first went to Alaska, alone, and now you have made it your personal stomping ground. But maybe the difference in our lifestyles isn't really all that surprising. Different choices take people in different directions, and the divergence in our paths began many years ago. Now I am here in Iowa, and you are . . . where? I haven't heard from you since July. Could you be in Hong Kong, or India, or Egypt? I expect I'll get a postcard sometime soon, from some faraway land that I'll be startled to learn has a real existence outside my imagination.

As I look over your letters again, I note the use of abbreviations and the paucity of punctuation marks, save for the frequent occurrence of "!" I muse that your life is too much a kaleidoscopic whirlwind to bother yourself much with commas and periods, with the spelling out of numerals and of "and." I reflect that you, of all the people I know, have the most right to use exclamation points liberally, and I am jealous.