

## **Walking**

*Carly Bossert*

Rose, Robyn, and I piled into the massive farm truck and roared off down the twisted road into the heart of Iowa's farming territory. The large all-terrain tires bounced over random potholes taking the icy gravel road in stride. Adrenaline coursed through my veins as we drove along in the domesticated stallion. I felt untouchable, protected from the world in the masculine Dodge Ram with an engine powerful enough to tear through even the most foreboding elements. Rose guided the beast with a trained hand, never straying onto the shoulder and still managing to amuse us with animated stories of past summers. I sat with my head resting on the cool windowpane partly listening to her tales but mostly watching the hills whiz by and letting my thoughts stray from the reality of the moment.

The occasional potholes took the tires by surprise much like the washboard ridges the tide leaves behind on the beaches catch the wheels of the sturdy beach trucks. Driving on a beach appears to be effortless. Most experienced beach drivers make it seem as simple as driving on blacktop. However, this illusion is far from reality. Many times I struggled with the beastly trucks trying to make them behave and follow my lead. Often the tires had other ideas and would let the sand carry them far from where I needed to be. Being able to control the trucks is an imperative skill. Wasting time because a driver could not control a truck is as taboo as throwing a fish by the tail. Crewmembers are inevitably ridiculed and reprimanded if they fail to take charge of a situation and allow the truck to take command. It is humiliating to falter after taking the wheel. As a beach-driving novice I constantly struggled to master the rusty hunks of metal. From the beginning I suffered a disadvantage as the sole female and my role as the crew's scape-goat was only reinforced when I failed to perform up to their standards, especially when I made an obvious blunder like stalling one of the manual transmission trucks. Learning to maneuver the trucks was the quickest way to gain respect and eventual

acceptance on a male dominated fish site.

Trucks play an intrinsic role on a commercial fishing set net site; they are the source of the labor used to pull nets in and out with the tide. We beat them mercilessly, forcing them to pull their own weight along with the weight of a net against the ripping tide. As difficult as they behave they remain the babies of the fish site. Every crewmember is required to spray off the thick layers of gray beach mud and perform daily maintenance for at least two trucks. We treat them with tenderness because without them we would be lost and our daily catch would never see the shore. Of the eight trucks we had on the site at least two were always out of service. On occasions when our few "dependable" ones would break down, we rushed around frantically trying to remedy the problem before something drastic happened. A fish site without running beach trucks is as useless as a foot that has fallen asleep.

It seems to me that farming and fishing share many inherent characteristics. There are very few self-employed professions that depend on the fine-tuned workings of so many people and machines. Farming and fishing families produce the same breed of people. Stubborn and self-reliant they cling to the old ways of doing things if that way continues to bring in profit and yet they are constantly looking for new ways to improve their yield. Everyone has a role. Some may appear useless until a crisis and then even the smallest job becomes imperative. In its prime a farm and fishing site is the epitome of a carefully arranged world where everything in working order produces a planned result. However perfection is rarely achieved, and it is the defining characteristic of a farmer or fisherman that they can still prevail when nothing goes as it should.

Hills swelled like waves, each one running in to the next, in one ceaseless motion. Patches of evergreens and their barren comrades stood in the wake of the hill's crest. These solitary scraps of life, the only landmarks within view, provided the eye a focal point, a place for measuring the world from. The land seemed stark and vibrant without contradiction. I knew under snow lay the dormant soil that

provided the lifeblood for hundreds of families. Its life pulsed beneath the icy layer protecting the livelihoods of many future generations of Iowan farmers.

A descendent of a long line of farmers, Rose takes great pride in her heritage and her family's farm. She grew up among cows, pigs, and tractors and has become quite intimate with the intricate system of farm life. She still does chores on her visits home, and as much as she enjoys being removed from it all, it is nevertheless her way of life. In her soul she cannot tear herself away, nor does she truly want to. Her face lit up at the opportunity to introduce Robyn and I to her world, and we eagerly wanted to experience what so many of our friends shared but we could only imagine. In an attempt to make new lives for ourselves here in Iowa, we wanted to be able to participate in and begin to understand as much as we could about what it means to be Iowan. Coming from opposite sides of the country, I from Alaska and Robyn from Massachusetts, we share little as far as a common background. One of our strongest bonds is our eagerness to forge a new identity in Iowa.

Finally we rumbled to a stop after crossing an old bridge. Rose killed the engine and jumped down from the driver's seat. I too jumped down, but instead of finding my footing solid I sank deep into the drifted snow in the ditch beside the road. After several expletives I extricated myself from the knee-high drift and softly tested the surface nearer to the truck. It proved slightly more secure and I shimmied my way along the side of the truck gripping to the rim of the bed.

Standing on the open road I finally had a chance to look at my surroundings. With the other girls already several feet away looking at the bridge, I felt the silence pressing on my shoulders and clearing all my senses. It was one of the few times when I had a chance to hear the noise of silence. People often say they are going out into nature to enjoy the silence, but there are few places as noisy as the woods at midday. Often we are so attuned to city noises and life noises that to our ears the natural environment seems silent. It is only after standing in the "silence" for a few moments that our ears can begin to pick out the subtle symphonies that the

unaffected world has to offer. Sounds that are easily covered by whispering voices suddenly became as loud as traffic.

My eyes wandered to the snow clinging to jagged ridges of distant cliffs. If I did not allow myself to look heavenward I could believe I was at home looking at the cliffs bordering the Inlet and stretching up for at least a mile. Trees clasped their thick tendriled roots around random protrusions on the face of the cliff. Their depressed branches laden with snow hung limply reaching for the ground.

One single tree stood alone from the rest; its lower trunk completely stripped of branches until its utmost pinnacle. The few stray appendages at the top formed a puff of branches. It reminded me of a tree from my childhood; the one I fondly called the pom-pom tree and looked for every time my family made the trek to Anchorage. This top-heavy tree looked like a dandelion during its last stages of maturation right before the wind catches its seeds to spread throughout the world. I wondered if the wind would ever catch this tree off-guard and suddenly try and carry it away.

I have never witnessed a tornado. My only experience with one comes from sitting in front of a television screen watching "Twister" and "The Wizard of Oz." I didn't know Iowa had tornadoes until I got here. I can't say I am eager to see one. I don't want to be carried away like Dorothy or be squashed like the Wicked Witch of the West. We have at least one earthquake a day at home, but somehow growing up with the earth's daily rumblings plus after effects of tsunamis and the fallout from occasional volcanic eruptions doesn't seem as scary as the prospect of a Hollywood style natural disaster. But, then again Hollywood style disasters don't generally hold true to real life, so the chances of a house falling on me aren't as real as Paramount Pictures would have me believe.

Then, as if my thoughts had summoned it, a burst of wind shot through the valley and up onto the ridge above. It rippled through the trees like a waterfall catches on rocks. The few stalks of wild grass ruffled as the wind disturbed their shoots and for a few seconds the smell of cattle filled the air. Then it was born away by the slight breeze that followed the stronger gust and tossed wisps of hair around in

my face. I gently brushed the stray locks of hair from my mouth and eyes. They continued to whirl around in my face as if I was swimming and the currents of water refused to release their hold. I gave up the fruitless struggle to control my unruly tresses and let them loose.

Suddenly a flurry of birds exploded from the inner sanctity of a tree. Their voices dissipated the tranquillity of the moment and I noticed Rose and Robyn were staring at me with a puzzled expression. I grinned at them and ran to catch up and join them by the edge of a creek. The cold air bit at my cheeks and filled my lungs. The wind tasted like an ice cube the second before it starts to melt.

My shoes sank into the soft layer of powdery snow, and it slowly melted through the canvas of my shoes, saturating my socks. Initially the cold snow shocked my toes, but they soon warmed up and I quickly forgot the uncomfortable sensation. I tried to follow other footsteps. Playing a solitary game of hopscotch I jumped from one indentation to another in an attempt to avoid the deeper snow from the last night's precipitation. The other girls laughed at my gyrations. Behind their laughter I could still hear the birds snapping at one another as they playfully dipped in and around the trees. The two sounds blended together; the laughter seemed as much a part of the natural setting as the birds chattering.

I joined them where the creek met the shore and we all stood mesmerized by the almost inaudible chortle of the water falling over rocks and branches lining the creek's bottom. The limpid water revealed each individual stone beneath its surface, hiding nothing from our curious eyes. I imagined splashing around in its refreshing water on a sizzling summer day, first shocked by the frigid water and then relieved at its cool embrace. I bent and picked up a handful of smooth pebbles. The snow melted in my palm and dripped between my fingers, leaving the cold stones behind. I tossed them gently into the lapping water. With a cavalcade of tiny pings they made an instantaneous impression and then disappeared on the bottom.

The only other disturbance in the peaceful afternoon was the slight rhythm of our breathing. I realized the birds'

song had ceased and I looked around to see where they had disappeared. Then I noticed a bird resting on a nearby boulder. Rather rotund and drably colored it resembled the comical chickadees from home. Chickadees are one of the few species of birds brave enough to weather the harsh Alaskan winters. Long after their much larger comrades have fled south, the tiny chickadees perched on bird feeders, staying warm by shivering and fluffing up their feathers. They are not the most attractively decorated birds, but they demand attention by faithfully remaining year-round. As far as I knew chickadees did not make their home in any Midwestern states so I decided this curious fellow must be a common song sparrow. Like a chickadee, the sparrow's crown was adorned with a monk-like cap of brown feathers. The rest of his chubby, fluffed up little body was dun colored with darker brown speckles. The underbelly lighter with more subtle flecks. He stared inquisitively at me for a few seconds and then must have decided that I was unworthy of further contemplation because he abruptly took to the air. After flying a short distance, he stopped and seemed to hover in midair without flapping his wings. A bit dubious at this bird's extraordinary talents, I peered closer for further exploration.

Looking up the small incline along the shore, I noticed a barbed wire fence running perpendicular to the creek from a nearby farm. From where I was standing it was barely distinguishable from the surrounding vegetation that had all but engulfed it over the years. The little bird was not defying gravity; he was merely perched on the wire. I wandered up the hill to the fence and found a stile hidden from my view down by the creek. I recalled the old nursery rhyme about the crooked old man who had a crooked cane, walked a crooked mile, and crossed a crooked stile. I had all but forgotten that little known rhyme until I saw a real stile. Up until that moment I thought they belonged to days gone by along with horse drawn buggies and candle lanterns.

Robyn disrupted my reverie with a tap on the shoulder. Together we trudged up the slope to join Rose on the bridge. It was one of the old style bridges with supports on the sides connected at the top with steel reinforcements.

Before coming to Iowa I had never seen this type of bridge. As far as I know, Alaska only has the simplistic kind with bright yellow guardrails on the side. This bridge commanded the surrounding area and appeared to take its job seriously. It was relatively narrow and it was hard to picture two vehicles squeezing by each other without some difficulty.

Once on a family camping trip I was traveling with my uncle and his family. As we were driving along my cousin and I noticed a bridge in the distance. To our untrained eyes it looked as if the road led directly to the old broken down crossing. My uncle jumped at the chance to terrify us and proceeded to convince us that the road did indeed lead to the bridge. Not only did we have to cross it but we had to lay the planks out in front of us one at a time constantly taking the ones from behind and placing them in front to provide something to drive on. And, as we were the smallest, my cousin and I were nominated to perform the hair-raising task of inching our way on the bridge perilously high above the ground. We were both incredibly gullible and fell for his story. For the rest of the ride we sat in petrified anticipation of our coming task. It never occurred to us to doubt him

Walking to the center I peered over the edge and gazed at the creek from a new perspective. From this height it was harder to hear the soft tumble of the water, and I could barely distinguish the individual stones that created its floor. Instead, I turned my attention to the slightly dilapidated farm nearby. There was no perceptible movement from within its boundaries. The machinery and outer sheds appeared to be well used, but no livestock filled the air with sounds. A faint odor drifted over, but it was so weak that I doubted any animals were sharing the silent afternoon with us. Surrounded on three sides by hills; the farm lay nestled in a small valley interrupted only by the single narrow road.

The buttery sun was just beginning to melt and pool behind the hills. I glanced at my watch and realized that soon darkness would fall. Here in Iowa the sun is over head one second and then with barely any warning darkness has completely filled the sky. Sunsets do not last nearly as long as they do at home, where one can expect at least another hour of sunlight after the sun starts to go down. I was disappointed

that we would have to cut our explorations short and return home if we wanted to drive by daylight. I motioned for the other girls to join me at the truck, and we all piled in. This time I took the wheel and brought the truck to life with a loud diesel roar. We slowly backed down the farm's driveway to turn around. I felt guilty for invading the farm's boundaries and disturbing the peaceful afternoon with the truck's engine. The modern truck seemed out of place in this pocket of time. Without the modern day invention one would have never guessed this farm belonged in the twentieth century. It appeared to have been plucked from its own time and placed here solely for our benefit. I had the sensation that as soon as we reached the other side of the hill the farm would disappear as a figment of our imagination. So, as we pulled up to the crest of the hill I paused and turned around for one last look at our afternoon's sanctuary.