

6. On Longing

If I ever meet a man who says, "You'll never want for anything," I'll pick up my purse, pay for my two glasses of chardonnay, and call a taxi. For two hours now, I've been staring out the window of the café. It's that kind of day—gray, still, cold—when I wonder if I shouldn't have just stayed in bed, or at least in my pajamas. But on days like this, I like to take books I've already read to a corner table in a cozy café, preferably in a bookstore, where people tend to show more respect for quiet. Today, it's *Door Wide Open*, a collection of letters between Jack Kerouac and Joyce Johnson, written in the two years following the publication of the infamous *On the Road*. It's a revealing exchange between a young woman never satisfied in love and a weary man crazed for the next moment. But I'm not reading. Instead, since the moment I sat down with my latte, I've been staring out the window. I know better than to sit next to a window. Not because there's a draft, or because I get too caught up in people-watching, but because I have a tendency to long, to court my sense of dissatisfaction. And longing, for me, usually occurs next to windows.

There's a Spanish film called *Central Station* in which a woman, in the final scene, sits on the bus as it departs and thinks about leaving, about what she's going back to, where

she's been, and where she'll never find herself. Throughout the film she never articulates this, until her final line: "I long for everything."

I used to rent *Central Station* as a catalyst for falling down in my own melancholy, but now I'm too afraid of what reading that subtitle might do to me. As I get older, the things I long for are broader, harder, and not just a door knock or a credit card away. Most days, it's the kind of longing Joyce Johnson talked about in one of her letters, the "longings we [can't] yet articulate." She and Kerouac had that in common, except that Jack believed in the power of geography, and he should have paid attention to one of his own literary predecessors, Ernest Hemingway: "You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another. There's nothing to that."

In my twenties, I lived a life promoting the opposite idea, driving to faraway places in hopes of escape. Two trips punctuated every year for me—Boquillas, Mexico, in October and Bottomless Lakes, New Mexico, in May. When the smell of fall first blew into Lubbock, Texas, I'd start imagining wood smoke, the drive through the Davis Mountains, the chasms of Big Bend. And as girls started showing up to bask in the sun at my apartment complex's pool, I felt myself moving west, dipping my toes into the cold waters of that New Mexico lake. One year I realized that the problems I carried with me every day in Texas had been transposed onto those foreign, yet familiar, landscapes, and

when I returned home I cogitated about the immediate re-appearance of my problems, which caused me to ache once again for the freedom of unknown territory. I had a difficult time reconciling why I couldn't bring tequila and mud tacos back to my office in the English building. Why those two worlds were so far apart, and why I couldn't keep the idea of Mexico without being there. I stare at a line in *Door Wide Open*, when Joyce urges Jack: "Stand still for a while and don't run. Things are worse when you run from them."

I consider how I've been working at staying in my life, working to stop longing to learn the streets in a new city. I think of Kerouac, who fought the desire to go with a need for solitude, who tried to convince Joyce that she, too, should not harbor fantasies of a life outside herself, in a country or a city far away: "In fact your salvation is within yourself, in your own essence of mind."

I do believe that most of what constitutes our longings comes down to distance, though not the kind recorded in numbers on the side of the highway. For most of us, there's a dangerous trap of space between what we have and what we want. In *My Father's Daughter*, Frank Sinatra's death was described by his youngest daughter, Tina, as an escape. According to her, her father left her mother, Nancy, for Ava Gardner in 1949, a year after Tina was born. But Sinatra never fully removed himself from his family, and during all the songs and women and shows of his life, he carried two dimes in his pockets to call home every evening to talk with his children. Here was a man who crossed the distance, who dared to imagine he could live a different life, though later

he realized that he wanted both—a family and the freedom to love other women. Tina wrote that once he left, he never felt "safe or whole" again.

If you wonder whether this is true, all you need to do is sit down and listen to Sinatra sing. He was hurting every day of his life. Maybe that's why Kerouac liked him so much, alluding to him in his novels as he did, because Kerouac himself wanted to settle down. His mind was on the wife he couldn't live with, and interaction was the mistress he craved as he suffered to watch the "days, weeks go by and nothing said," a line from his novel *Big Sur* tracing this particular struggle.

Kerouac's salvation lurked in the corners of city streets, in the escapes from his mind to someone else's through the riffs of a stranger's ramblings or the all-night conversations between his friends. But after a while, he'd hear the words of his friends as the babble of a river, and he'd want to go away, to be alone. Then, when alone, he'd itch to get back to his friends. Fleeting peace or a fleeting connection? "What binds us is invisible," he writes in *On the Road*. And what would silence him would prove to be even more illusory, as alcohol threw a fire under the feet of his demons.

Through the years, I've struggled with the choice between isolation and connection, but most of all my desire has always involved the idea of *somewhere else*, or wanting what is not there. Men. Or desert landscapes. Or a better job. I know I'm not unique in wanting more, in missing what I used to have or what I've never known, but I do think I'm part of a group of people who refuse to ignore

those longings. Some people have never run off in the middle of the night or made the phone call at whatever cost.

To me, that kind of longing—longing within stasis—is more threatening, though I can admit I've known that as well. And through the years, my drinking eclipsed any other longing I might have. I am intimately familiar with being overcome by the notion that all I longed for was my next glass of wine. Still, my thoughts return again and again to what I long for besides that drink, and, like the woman in *Central Station*, I long for everything. At least she's on a bus when she says that; Joyce Johnson is sitting in a cabin with the ghost of a man she is still clearly in love with after all those years. I don't blame her. I understand her, especially when she writes: "The trips I didn't take . . . have always haunted me."

I remember when a friend's son was three, she worked to alter his "I want" statements to "May I please have?" So if he blurted out, "I want hot chocolate!" she responded, "How do we ask for things?" He made a face, sometimes jumping up and stomping on the floor in frustration. After all, it's difficult to discover obstacles to desire. Finally, when he mumbled, "May I please to have hot chocolate?" he was quickly rewarded with the desired cup of it, overflowing with marshmallows.

Their exchanges raised questions for me. How *do* we ask for things? Can it be as easy as syntax? I've always been convinced that our needs become more complex as we get

older, but I can remember the force of that little boy's longing for hot chocolate being as strong as my own for solitude, as essential to survival as an annual trip to Mexico. I suppose the distinction comes in how long we harbor that longing. I cannot recall my friend's son spending the afternoon staring out the window at the empty driveway, pondering the hot chocolate he didn't get on a Saturday morning, though I've caught myself many times staring off into the distance, thinking about the things I can't or don't have.

Now I am staring at the Brakes Shop across the street, wondering if there's a man in there who's kneeling down to check brake pads and yearning for more. "Yearn," a word that lingers as heavy and slow in the throat as it does in the chest. Or maybe that man has no idea that there is more. I see longing in the eyes of most people, like the crossing guard I pass on the way to school each day. Sometimes, I want to pull over, motion her to climb in, and offer her a ride—as John Steinbeck puts it in his own travel narrative, *Travels with Charley*—"away from Here." I want to offer her some kind of *Thelma and Louise* insistence on not taking it anymore. Each day as I drive slowly past her, I wave. She knows.

Window staring gets me nowhere. I know this, which is why I know better than to position myself here. And it's not that I really need to go anywhere, though for some I think it's imperative. There are levels of unhappiness that become unacceptable when prolonged or ignored. For those people, if it means filling out a change-of-address form at the post office, here's my pen. For me, I already know that I

will move to a different city, a different state, sooner rather than later. And my state of mind will pack its bags and put them in the U-Haul, right next to my wobbling television stand. Okay, so maybe on this move I'll finally lose that TV stand, but I don't want to lose my capacity for longing, for missing, for wondering what might be, for yearning for what has come, gone, or disappeared before I had a chance to save it. What I want is both far and near, or even out of range, and the distance between all of those could be one night or one year or never.

For me, not knowing what's next keeps my possibilities open. The people walking by the window, staring at me staring out, can't begin to imagine the things that I've longed for: longer legs, a man to buy me a beer and never ask me what my name is, my little girl to always want to spend time with me, a glass of chardonnay, a weekend getaway, electrolysis on my eyebrows, a phone that rings when I'm ready, to run into Robert Redford in a restaurant, to wear only matching panty and bra sets, to always be looking forward to something, to stop replaying conversations in my head, to learn how to make lasagna, to read *Don Quixote*, to hop a train and see where I end up, to get back to Mexico in November, to take a nap and not worry about what time I need to wake up, to know where I'll be in five months but never know what I might be doing in twenty minutes, to find that rock along the Poudre River *and* the one along the Rio Grande, for Sinatra to sing the next song on the radio, because "nobody cares like Sinatra sings." Kerouac wrote that.

7. My Two Countries

The borders are not secure. Highway 385 South out of Big Bend National Park leads to the Rio Grande, the border between Texas and Mexico. When you get close, you can feel it. The farther you get down toward Mexico, the quieter the world becomes. After thirteen miles, you'll come to a dirt parking lot that backs up on brush, and then a clearing that leads to the bank of the river, where worn men wait to take you across the border for \$2 in boats that were once aquamarine but have now—with the murky current, the soles of cowboy boots, the summers of flip-flops—faded to a gray reminder of their original color. Two bucks and you're in a different country. No passport, no ID check, no one guarding the borders, only the tired-eyed oarsmen slowly pulling you into foreign territory, like some kind of dark gravity. A place that feels like nowhere.

Boquillas del Carmen is a mile into Mexico, but there's really no road, just sandy ruts and the cracked, gray, flat clay of a landscape marked by an eerie absence and the feeling that you shouldn't be headed toward some distant town. Once across the border, you have three choices: You can hop in the back of a pickup truck and pay five bucks to be driven into the city; you can straddle the back of a mule and ride there like some ancient vaquera for the same price;