

"Physical Freeze"

by Sally Smith

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physical freeze

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When I moved from Toronto to Vancouver in 1989, I decided to take the train. There were a couple of reasons. One was, I knew it would be one of the last trips the cross-Canada train would make through Calgary, Banff and Tunnel Mountain. The other was, the distance is about 4,500 km or 2,700 miles—a lot of miles to cover—and I wanted a chance to register the transition. Not to mention the opportunity to cover the broad range of landscape along the way. Three days and nights on the train was just what I needed to let it all sink in.

Compare this with a five-hour plane ride.

Seeing Canada from a train is seeing your country from a whole different angle. Leaving the largest city, Toronto, and heading up through the Canadian Shield—rocks, stunted wind-blown trees, lakes—then into one-and-a-half days of the Prairies where rolling hills and cattle roam, through Calgary, where I stopped for 24 hours to visit my sister, and on into the foothills of the Rockies leading slowly up and up into the spectacular views at glacial Lake Louise and ever-popular Banff, was an education in itself. We continued then, through the night and the next morning, down through stunning mountain passes into the depths of Tolkienesque Tunnel Mountain, carved to cope with endless forces of avalanches through the winter. From there we crossed through the final, gigantic province of British Columbia where the mountains simply don't end: an entire province of ranges that repeat in waves until we travellers, sleep-eyed, reached the fertile Fraser Valley, peering at farms displaying lush rows of produce, framed by softer, broader Coastal Mountains, as we prepared



for the final destination—voicing ooohs and ahhs as we saw the big blue Pacific sparkling in a heart-warming display, surrounded by beaches and peaks and the young, fresh city of Vancouver—its gentle, modern architecture mirroring the softness of the climate, the warmth and kindness of a space protected from the full ocean onslaught by the vast vertical landmass of Vancouver Island, just a ferry ride away.

Vancouver was a place where one can arrive and stay—a place of stillness that tempted me to slow down and just be. Despite being eons away from my family: I picked up quickly on a mutual unspoken agreement among the multitude of nomads in that West Coast city that we would be each others' families.

At 28 years old I was embarking on a new life based on a love affair with Vancouver that had begun when I saw it for the first time in 1985.

To many it must seem strange, certainly scary, to move so far away from home. Yet it's common in Canada—the



largest country in the world, populated by only 30 million. There are many landscapes, few major cities. And for me, it wasn't the first time I'd relocated to a whole new land. I was born in Cornwall, a county on the southwest tip of England, known for its rugged coastal beaches. At five we moved to the county next door, Devon. Then at six years old, my family moved to London. By the time I was eight, we immigrated to Canada. The stark contrast of moving from tidy, planned neighbourhoods that had evolved over centuries to the maverick spaces of a new and less cultivated land had left a yearning within me for a return to the salt water beaches of my earlier years.

And so I finally made the journey West, 20 years later, to a place that evoked the past yet promised something new. Vancouver had celebrated its centennial just three years before my arrival, in 1986.

It is a great luxury to move across a country. While it's common in North America, in most parts of the world it's less so. Here, we're a continent founded on immigrants.

We're full of people and descendants of those who sought to start fresh with a clean slate.

Now that I'm in my early forties I don't take moving quite so lightly. But that's only after returning recently from a 2 1/4 year stint living in England—to satisfy a need to return to my roots once more. So perhaps my reduced inclination to pull up anchor is due to how much I've already gotten out of my system.

Moving away leaves blanks. Not when you move just down the street. But when you leave what you know. There's a difference in the person I, was growing up in rural Cornwall in the early 60s, where people were poor and tough and we were reminded to wash our school uniforms once a week. A difference between that and the person I became when we moved to Richmond Hill, ON (just north of Toronto) in the late 60s—it was like someone turned on the light: no more strict teachers or bullies in the playground for me. I encountered the concept of fashion—the right length of jeans and matching one's clothes with the correct colours. My eyes were opened to different words, phrases, accents, colours of skin. Wider still to broader opinions and open spaces that hadn't been tamed—variety in everything: religion, houses, ice cream—choices, choices, choices.

When you look at the concept of globalization, you could say that moving around is an important aspect of understanding different perspectives. Certainly that has been part of my background, for which I'm grateful. On the other hand, you could say that moving thousands of miles is incredibly indulgent because of the ecological footprint that goes with it. Consider how much energy and resources we use flying around the world, moving furniture from province to province, state to state, country to country. Consider how much personal energy we use escaping from one reality to the next.

Was I running away when I left Toronto? Yes. I was unhappy and searching. On the other hand, it was once pointed out to me that I was embodying the archetypal journey west, seeking to know myself and discover the treasures within.

Doors did open for me, allowing me to broaden the definition of who I was and explore my potential. So I'm grateful for the experience.

Yet I remember the words from the Waterboys song, "The Whole of the Moon":

I wandered out in the world for years

While you just stayed in your room

I saw the crescent

You saw the whole of the moon!

Is there something to be said for staying put? Definitely.

After spending three months at an Ashram in Kootenay Bay, BC, a few years ago, I explored the merit of facing one's demons and coming to terms with inner restlessness. It's something I'm still learning about but I certainly experienced the calm and peace that comes with staying put. And I gleaned a lifetime of information about myself in a short time, being given the tools to observe and listen to the still, small voice within.

When my dad was dying a couple of years ago, I made an 18-hour plane-train-and-automobile journey from England to Chatham, ON, twice to see him. If it weren't for the technology of airplanes, I wouldn't have made it. BUT, if it weren't for planes, we probably would have been living a lot closer to each other!

The second visit to my dad's—the doctor had given him 10 days to live—stretched into six weeks. He wasn't ready to go after all. I was on a leave of absence from work and chose to take as much time as I needed to be with him. Luckily I was supported by my colleagues and felt blessed for their understanding and encouragement to make the most out of these last days. I spent a slow but precious time with him, visiting briefly too with my mother and sister who lived a four-hour drive north. It was like time stopped and all the daily concerns of life disappeared as I focused on something far more meaningful than prompt answers to emails or keeping up with the latest style.

Each evening we would pop in a video—his way of sharing intimacy—and cry or laugh together as directed by

the sentiment of the medium?. He especially liked *Shrek*, a favourite of mine too.

Eventually on that trip, my dad and I were able to let go and say our goodbyes—he ended up living another seven months. I say all this because it's an opportunity to reflect on how there are times in life when we can stop, jumping out of the net of frenzied living, to arrive at a deeper place where time doesn't matter. This was one of those times.

When the news finally came of his death, I sat very still. Time seemed non-existent. In that moment, a voice said, "That's it, I'm going home." Within three weeks I'd uprooted my British life and returned to the New World, embraced by family and friends as we all focused on the ritual of my father's transition to his next existence.

I took my time putting the pieces of my life back together, eventually returning to B.C. to sell my house. Since then I've stayed put in the same home for a year now, struggling with urges to uproot, try this, try that. I have dreams of attending university in Boulder, CO, or Canterbury, UK. Of travelling to Nepal, India and Peru. I treasure the gift of time I had with my father, feeling a deep satisfaction that we made our peace with each other, healing the hurts from the past and leaving me with the legacy of his fatherly love to replace them.

Despite my travel dreams, my understandably itchy feet and restlessness, it is getting easier to see that there are times to slow down and times to move.

A horse lover told my friend once that our spirit moves at the speed of a horse. If you travel by car, or plane, it takes time for your spirit to catch up. Perhaps that's what's happening to me: I need my spirit to catch up, after all those flights across the Atlantic, before I move on with the rest of my life. ☐

