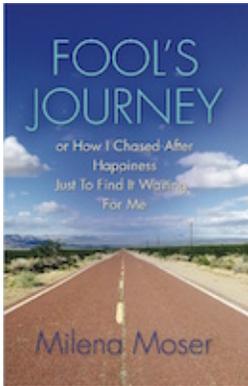


FOOL'S JOURNEY

or How I Chased After
Happiness
Just To Find It Waiting
For Me

Milena Moser



After a painful divorce and with her 50th birthday approaching, a successful but burned-out writer takes three months off to travel through the United States. All alone: The plan is to reconnect with her inner voice. To rediscover herself not as a mother or a wife, not as a friend and maybe not even as a writer but simply as a human being. But her inner voice says loud and clear: "I don't want to be alone anymore!"

In order to restore her belief in love, she visits all the happy couples she knows - hoping, of course, that their happiness will rub off on her. From Maine to Louisiana, from New York to Santa Cruz, each place, each couple teaches her something new. How did she end up being such a cliché? What happened to her dreams? And why is she so tired? Along the way she comes to terms with her past and, yes, in the end, she does fall in love – though not with a man, but with

a tiny casita in Santa Fe. And a whole new story begins...

Fool's Journey or How I Chased After Happiness Just to Find It Waiting for Me

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FOOL'S JOURNEY

OR

**HOW I CHASED AFTER HAPPINESS
JUST TO FIND IT WAITING FOR ME**

Milena Moser

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This is a Memoir. Which means: This is what I remember. Memory is fluid, treacherous, personal. Memory is not universal truth. I am not pretending it is. In the interest of privacy, some of the names and places have been changed.

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For Victor who doesn't appear at all:

Love is the answer

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Tour Guide

I meant to go on a road trip. For years I'd been talking about it. For my 50th birthday I would take three months off and drive across the US in a rental car, completely alone, completely without a set route or goal, following only my inner voice which would say “turn right here. Stop. Stay the night.” Or, “it's boring here – go on.” Because my inner voice, in the course of my long and unhappily ended marriage, had gotten small and silent.

On the outside, I had it all: I was a successful writer with 18 or so books published and a weekly column that endeared me to a great many readers who followed my sometimes chaotic, but mostly charmed life. I was married and had two almost-grown sons. We lived in a dream house in a beautiful village in the middle of Switzerland after having spent 8 years in San Francisco. But inside I felt hollow. I felt like a fraud. My marriage was increasingly lonely and I felt out of place in my own home. In my homeland too. Worst of all, I couldn't even hear myself think. Hence the idea of going on the road, all by myself.

On the Road: the classic rite of passage for generations of young men before and after Jack Kerouac. A time of freedom on the roads after leaving school and before the beginning of real life. I would enter it as an aging woman between family life and... what? To find that out, I had to travel by myself because even the most considerate travel companion would derail me from the idea and drown my inner voice which, rather than decide, would keep asking, “are you hungry? You want to stop here? You like this motel? Or should we look for another one?”

Relying completely on myself, taking care of no one else, I would get to know myself all over again.

It was an idea everyone I shared it with, immediately understood and loved, including my publisher and several magazine editors. That was a first. Not that it was my first book. But this was different: Normally I don't know what I'm writing until I see it appear on the page. But this time I had a plan, one I could formulate and sell in thirty seconds. I caught myself talking about it all the time, just because it felt so good to have a plan, an idea everyone understood and found interesting. Maybe I was overdoing it. At some point it began to feel shallow. And the closer the departure came, the less I looked forward to it. Because in the years between coming up with this plan and its execution I had ended my marriage. I lived alone and heard my inner voice speaking louder and quite clear. It said: the last thing I want is to sit alone in a car for days.

Bad timing, you could say. Many would have forced the issue. Not me. To go about it in this way would've meant to ignore precisely what it was all about. More important than the good idea was the question behind it: What do *I* want?

A most radical question for a woman with children. I remember an incident from nearly twenty years earlier. We were in Egypt with friends and the kids, and my younger one was very little and had diarrhea. We thought about leaving for Cairo where another girlfriend was waiting, earlier than planned. I can still see myself sitting on the bed, discouraged, exhausted, in tears.

“What do you want to do?” asked Randa. “Tell me and I'll make it possible.”

“Well, for Cyril (my younger son) it would be better... But our friend Ursula had so been looking forward... My mother doesn't want... But Lino (my older son) just said that he wanted...”

Randa shook her head. Then she shook me. “What do YOU want?” she asked. “You, just you!” I looked at her in confusion. “Just me” didn't exist. Couldn't exist. And that was OK. That was how it was supposed to be. Living with young children, having a family and a career is hard enough without having an inner voice crying “and me, and me, and me?” But somewhere along the way that voice was needed again. Turns out it had atrophied, like an unused muscle. In the recent hard years it had been exercised only a little bit. Once in a while I imagined it literally, dangling from the parallel bars, painfully shimmying along like a physiotherapy patient after a serious accident, clumsy but hopeful.

So I sat myself down and tried to listen.

What am I missing?

Not much. Just *Happiness*.

The circumstances of my separation wore me out. My formerly unshakable faith in love was cracked. And my surroundings weren't exactly helping restore it. “That's men for you,” women in my age group like to say. “What can you expect?”

Expect? Everything of course! But my inner romantic was fading. Consumptive and wan she lay on a chaise lounge, a lace hanky pressed to her lips. Every separation among my friends, every blind-date horror I learned about, every bitter maxim depleted her more.

Shortly before my departure I knew that there was only one hope for my inner romantic: In order to believe in it again, I had to see happiness with my own eyes. Deliberately I planned my route so I would encounter happy couples on a regular basis. Because they exist. They don't stand out because happiness for them is commonplace. They don't speak of it.

Other than that I'd drift. I'd listen to music, go dancing, do all the things I hadn't done for way too long. Three weeks before departure I realized I had mis-scheduled an appearance. Again, there was the temptation to blow off the whole thing. Adventures are exhausting. Why not simply stay home? Plant my garden, get to know the city I've lived in for two years, make new friends? Swim in the river?

Only, I knew I wouldn't be able to explore the blank space inside if I stayed. However, I did decide to interrupt the trip half way and return to Switzerland for a week or two. I would celebrate my fiftieth in San Francisco where I'd lived for eight years. And in between I'd travel around the country, in search of the unknown.

I was getting excited again. Even more, I set all my hopes on this trip. All my desires. I would throw off the ballast of the past. I would burst free. The happiness of others would rub off on me. I would fall in love en route! Already I saw myself with a garland in my hair standing under a lemon tree marrying a man – faceless so far – and why not? Maybe I wouldn't come back at all...

My fantasy ran away with me before I had reached the airport. Alas, two things right off: It turns out I don't like driving, especially not by myself.

And: Happiness always looks different.

Welcome Home

The day before I'm due to leave, Katchie decides we have to check out Canyon Road with its incomparable density of galleries of local art. I don't know much about art but I know what I like. And what I don't: just about everything that is exhibited here, bronze bears, sunsets with horses, angels in night skies, hand-woven rugs that cost tens of thousands of dollars, Navajo pots behind glass. It's hot. On the road tourists throng, so too in the galleries. Then I see a sign: *Open House*.

“Come on, let's go look at a house for a change,” I say. It's a kind of hobby of mine. I always keep an eye out for the real estate signs, check their offerings as though I were seriously interested. In my mind I furnish the loft in Hamburg, the attic apartment in Paris, the converted mill in the country. I also often dream of apartments and houses, see every detail, every nook and cranny, very clearly. When I wake up I could draw them. The rooms I've dreamt about are as familiar as if I'd lived in them.

We follow the sign into the back courtyard of a gallery and through an open door in the wall that leads onto a tiny patio. A double door, then a living room. I sink onto the window seat, look at the tiny patio and think: Ah, it's lovely to be home after such a long trip. Excuse me? Be home? I get up, the house is full of people, it's tiny. A square room, divided by curtains. A bedroom, a kitchen, a tiny bathroom. The living room with the window seat, a fireplace. Thick, irregular, whitewashed mud walls, white beams on the ceiling. At the entrance hang dried chili pepper strings. It's traditional but not rustic. I give it a quick look, everything's familiar, like home. So much so that

the other visitors soon get on my nerves. Why are they tramping around my house?! This is my house!

I've had this feeling twice before, once in San Francisco, once in Aarau. I was happy in both places. Was? I am happy in Aarau. I've lived in the apartment for two years, a place fate arranged for me when I was looking for a home after my hasty departure from our dream house. The first weeks I lived in a studio I had rented next to my writing workshop. During my marriage one certainty grew: I need my alone time. It's part of me. When I'm alone I regenerate, I become myself. Now that I'm really alone, I'm not so sure any longer. Maybe I simply needed to recover from my marriage.

After the separation I found the apartment in Aarau. It is my refuge. Every time I come home I'm content. When I was doing so badly that I couldn't go outside the front door and was lying on the sofa in the bay window crying for weeks, all I had to do was open the window to hear life in the old town alleys and realize: it's all here. Life goes on. Right outside my house. When I'm ready I go down the stairs and I'm right in the midst of it.

Here in Santa Fe it's similar. The little house sits hidden and quiet only ten steps from the busiest street of the city. The uneven thick walls keep the noise out, the old trees bow protectively over the seating area. But the silence, the seclusion can be abandoned any time – right away you're smack dab in the middle of pulsating life.

On the table lies a brochure advertising the house. “An ideal home for a writer,” it says. I know, I think, I know! The real estate agent comes up to me, hands me a card. “Hello, Herr Nuescheler,” I say and pronounce his name in Swiss. He's taken aback. “Most people call me Mister Natschler,” he says.

“Well, yes, I'm from Switzerland...”

“Me, too!” he shouts. Or at least his grandfather who had emigrated from Grindelwald was. We talk a bit about the house. Then I turn to Katchie, who's still waiting, and say “I have to have a drink. I've got to sit down. My knees are shaking.”

On the street a tall man with mirrored sunglasses comes up to us. “So, girls, is the Casita pretty enough for you?”

“Are you the owner?” Katchie asks.

That he is. His name is Frederic. Katchie asks him the most important questions right off: what's the parking situation, is the roof in good shape? I'm not really listening. We go to the Teahouse where Natalie Goldberg famously wrote *Writing Down the Bones*. I ignore the four-page tea menu and order a double espresso despite the fact I'm already jittery. I don't know what's happening to me. I think I'm in love. “Katchie,” I say “I think I've got to buy this house.”

I don't have any money. I have a house in San Francisco with a curse on it, an absurd and endless legal battle. The last thing I would've imagined was buying yet another house. Especially not in a place where I have no connections other than a happy couple that lives here. Especially not on a street where I get bombarded with bad art. But there's this really strong feeling: this is my home. So we go back. In the meantime everyone has left. The real estate agent and Frederic sit on garden chairs and drink Tequila with grapefruit juice. They offer us drinks. “No, thank you,” I say “I feel drunk already.”

I look everything over once more. The house is really tiny, about five hundred square feet, but cleverly set up, every corner functional. I could move in immediately. I wouldn't change anything. Again I land on the window seat.

“This is my favorite spot, too,” says Frederic. I talk to him like an old friend. I feel as though, like with his house, we'd been acquainted for a long time. Suddenly I have a vision: I see a tiny Christmas tree next to the fireplace, my two sons

sprawled on the sofa. I'm imagining Christmas here. What an absurd thought. Christmas holds the most painful wound from the separation. Christmas weighs on me the whole year. And suddenly there's an alternative. At least in my imagination. As unrealistic it is, it's comforting. I put my hand on my heart to keep the image safe.

Today's Sunday, tomorrow Monday, Memorial Day, a holiday. Monday night I depart; I fly back to New York and then Switzerland for the mis-scheduled performance. The first part of my trip is finished. That evening I talk to Katchie and Joshua. I'm excited as it feels as though I were indeed in love.

"Good thing Frederic is gay," I say "or I'd fall for him too." "Gay?" Katchie asks. "What makes you say that?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Though I was never very good at recognizing such a thing. Eight years in San Francisco didn't sharpen my 'gay-dar.' Basically a person's sexual orientation only interests me if I'm interested in him. But I didn't want to go there. I blush.

"I don't really want to remain alone forever," I told Frederic. "I wouldn't want to live in a house in which only I could fit. I wouldn't want to cement my singleness." I would never have said such a thing to a straight man. How embarrassing.

Frederic only laughed and said that he had certainly had "partners" in the last seven years but only a special person could fit in this house. Gays say "partner" don't they?

"You've been caught," Joshua pinpoints, but he means something different. "You have the Adobe fever!" It catches most people when they first get here. They are attracted by the expanse, the space, and the relatively cheap real estate prices. They can afford something bigger here, and there is space. The typical Santa Fe house is a one-story sprawling adobe structure with a lot of land and a broad view, all the way to the blue

mountains at the horizon. I don't particularly like adobe architecture, I find it kitsch. The house doesn't have a view. But it has thick walls that close around me protectively. It is tiny. It is perfect. It is my house.

Katchie calls her real estate agent Lisa who promises to come see the house the following day despite the holiday. "The price is right," she says. "I'd snatch it up. How are you going to do it?"

"Well, I'll have to take out a loan," I say. "I'll call my bank in Switzerland. It isn't a holiday there today."

I already know what my banker, Mr. Perez, will say. He'll try to talk me out of it. I think up the arguments to convince him. I have a personal, almost familial, connection to my bank, even if that sounds ridiculous. My grandfather, a lonely, gloomy man I barely knew, had fallen in love for a second time late in life. His wife whom we called Tante Klaerli came from Lenzburg, where this small bank with only a handful of branches is situated. And my grandfather put all his money there. Out of love.

My grandfather died when I was nine and left me quite a bit of money – at least that was how it appeared to me. When I turned twenty-one and could legally access the money I wasn't really a grown-up yet. The train ride from Zurich to Lenzburg seemed endless at the time, and if anyone had told me I would end up living near there, I would've laughed.

First I opened an account. A solemn moment. Then I received the money and traveled to Paris where I managed, in a very short time, to spend it all. I have no idea how that happened. All I remember is having lots of visitors. And that we liked ordering colorful cocktails in flower vases decorated with umbrellas and plastic giraffes. Maybe it has something to do with those drinks that I remember so few details. In retrospect,

though, it was not wasted time because that's when I started writing. Seriously writing.

I didn't dare call it that back then. Having grown up in a literary household, I hadn't met a single female writer. In my childhood there were only wives of writers, and writers like my father, serious men with at least university degrees, who smoked pipes and discussed how they would change the world. I didn't want that. I wanted to tell stories. I just didn't know how to do it. From the age of eight I carried note books where I scribbled diary type sentences and sometimes a bad poem. The leap into fiction appeared to me as presumptuous and dangerous as the leap from our roof into the yard. An adventure of which my first friend tried to persuade me. He was a bit older than I was, already in Kindergarten and, unlike me, he was allowed to watch TV. And not just children's programs but series where real shooting happened, for instance *Daktari*. He often talked about *Daktari* and after I begged him for a long time he relented to play *Daktari* with me. It went like this: we stood under the porch, armed with long wooden sticks, and tried to knock off the snow while shouting "Daktari, Daktari!" And when the snow fell from the roof we ran away. It would've been better to jump from the porch roof into the snow piles but my mother caught us and so it stayed with the sticks. Soon afterwards he moved away. As a parting gift he gave me a cardboard box and a shell. He promised to cut a hole in the bottom of the car to let himself fall out and return to me. We were going to get married. I never heard from him again. Years later I saw *Daktari* on TV. The series takes place in Africa. There is a cross-eyed lion and a monkey, but absolutely no trace of snow.

After finishing my apprenticeship in an arts bookstore, I went to Paris under the pretext of taking French classes. I connected with a group of budding filmmakers who met weekly to discuss their life dreams and plans while smoking lots of

cigarettes. In that environment, I dared say it out loud for the first time. When asked what I did I answered boldly, "I'm a writer."

Maybe because no one knew me. Maybe because I was speaking a foreign language. In any case, no one broke out in wild laughter. No one yelled, "Who, you? You got to be joking!" No, the question that mainly followed was, "And, you got published yet?"

"No," I answered truthfully. "Non." But that wasn't serious; the filmmakers had the same problem. We were young. We stood, so to speak, on the starting blocks. We discussed our projects and I'll never know if the others exaggerated as fearlessly as I did. I spoke of short stories and the beginnings of a novel, while in reality all I had were observations from my daily life scribbled in a Chinese notebook, black with red corners. Maybe the film projects of my new friends were as much a pipedream as my novel. But I almost got used to my identity as writer whose only missing piece was the actual writing. But fate or happenstance had a young German join our group, who of course wanted to read something of mine. Because I write in German, my French friends never asked.

I had talked myself into a corner. Out of which I now had to write myself. "Sure, no problem," I said and went home to write three very short stories, strongly reminiscent of my then favorite authors, before the next meeting. The German was not impressed. "Interesting," was all he said. But it was a beginning.

Next I claimed to be writing a novel. We sat on the floor in the home of a young musician and I looked around the room, stole a line from a poster here and a sentence from a conversation there. "Ah, yes, my novel is called *Late at Night* and deals with a, ahem, musician, no a photographer named Biba who..."

Later I sat on the toilet and wrote in my Chinese notebook, “*Late at Night, A Novel.*”

That's how it started. That's how I began to invent. To blur the boundaries between the various realities. The first step into the void was the easiest. The snow was so high that I could step directly from our porch roof into the soft cold white. Everything was already there. Apes and lions, staves and snow. Lies, fantasies, dreams and images – my head was full of them. All I had to do was write them down.

That was how three months and my inheritance passed. And that was why, when the money began to run out, I wrote a letter. To my bank. That was before ebanking and ATM machines. I wrote long letters on the manual typewriter from which my first novel came into being. I explained my situation in flowery, and I hoped, convincing language. For my evolution as a writer it was vital that I remain in Paris. But I was lacking some funds to bridge what I was sure to be only a short period of time until I had found a publisher.

It took more than six years until my first novel came out. Six years during which I would leave Paris and take various day jobs. But I did end up getting the money – an investment in my future.

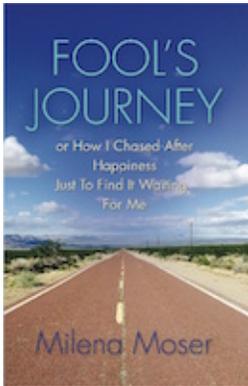
Years later when I came into that very bank, which still looked the same, with the big check from a real publisher, the clerk remembered my letter from long ago. To be honest, he confessed, he hadn't totally believed in my success. He had worried about me. But now it was all good.

My bank shares in my life. I trust it. So I will bow to the verdict of Mr. Perez. In the meantime I allow myself daydreams that flit through my mind like short films. I see myself planting a lavender bush with a straw hat on my head. I see myself galloping on a small horse behind Katchie. The hat falls off. I see myself sit on Frederic's red garden chair reading, forgetting

the time. All at once something begins to stir inside me which I haven't felt for a long time and for good reasons. It's my life, I suddenly feel. It's becoming my own life. Soon I'll be able to ask: what do I want? How do I want to live?

I don't allow myself these questions yet. Not quite. But I feel that one day I'll get there. One day, soon. Lisa drives me to her office to fill out a purchase agreement. Then I sit in the Teahouse again. I wait for Joshua. He wanted to look at the house again. I call a friend who knows New Mexico well. She is instantly excited. "You belong there," she says. "I can easily imagine you there." Joshua doesn't show up so I call Frederic. "Joshua's already come and gone," he says. "Do you want to come by another time?" "No," I say. "It's not necessary. I'll make an offer in the next couple of days."

"Now I have weak knees," he says.



After a painful divorce and with her 50th birthday approaching, a successful but burned-out writer takes three months off to travel through the United States. All alone: The plan is to reconnect with her inner voice. To rediscover herself not as a mother or a wife, not as a friend and maybe not even as a writer but simply as a human being. But her inner voice says loud and clear: "I don't want to be alone anymore!"

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a tiny casita in Santa Fe. And a whole new story begins...

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