No Mistaking Paradise

The day Ronald Reagan was elected president for the first time, everything I owned was in a 1978 Subaru moving west on Interstate-94. Entering Idaho, it was clear Jimmy Carter had lost. Except for Lyndon Johnson he was the only president I had ever voted for. It would be 28 years before there was another.

I was running away, far away—again. I had about $1,200 in cash, no job, no prospects and a frightened mind.

Nevertheless I was glad to be running away; away from my little house on the prairie; a girlfriend of three-plus years; her developmentally disabled 13-year-old daughter who put a rubber dinosaur on the dashboard one morning when I was cursing a car that would not kickover in minus 40 weather even with a block heater attached; a wonderful big sled dog who put her muzzle in my arm pit when back pain wouldn´t let me off the hall floor; my first real newspaper job; a big garden always clogged with creeping Jenny; a makeshift passive solar heating system built with shinny offset plates from the paper; a refrigerator-size wood-burning stove we bought from a farmer for $20; a fence built of old railroad ties and barnwood and that hid a single lame marijuana plant; a week in traction; a nervous breakdown; and the notion that I ever would have or should have a safe or a common life. I was 34.

The worry was the worst part except for the inability to stop it. Quitting can be so hard. Luckily she had told me to leave, but it took three sad months in a basement apartment on a borrowed bed reading “The Executioner´s Song” to finally just run away. Truth is I was glad to go. “Do you think I am lying,” I said when she complained I was dragging my feet about moving out. “I want out too.” I always want a home but never can keep together the relationships on which they are based.

I should have known better. I got to North Dakota by running away from Albuquerque where I had arrived after running away from a bad relationship in Denver, where I had slinked to after going east with ex-Army buddies as they dropped off at hometowns in Iowa and Illinois.

I wound up in Chicago Heights with a not-close Army friend. I had to borrow $50 from his father to get a train back to Denver. Bob told me later that his father warned him to never be anything like me. No worry there. Bob was happy to never leave Chicago Heights and never did. I think he had two-point-five well-adjusted children.

It is a more than a thousand-mile drive from mid-North Dakota to Medford, Oregon, where my buddy from fourth grade lived with his wife. I had known him since we were 12. I was with him when he fell in love with his wife at San Carlos Reservoir in Arizona. The three of us were in an un-airconditioned bathtub Porsche on our way to his parents in California after Mexico would not let us in at either Juarez or Nogales. I had stayed with his brother and his aunt too after running to New Mexico. It was his father who saw me into adulthood when mine knocked up his girlfriend and started another family at age 40. My friend´s family were always there saving me and would be again.

I slept under a tiny desk in their cramped ´office´ that night. Next day I hit for road to Oregon newspapers. It wasn´t like me. I had spent years mailing resumes for throughout the West when out of the blue I got a single interview in North Dakota. The newspaper business was dying.

I went because my girlfriend, the ex-wife of an ex-friend, had grown up in North Dakota, and she wanted out of Albuquerque as I did. We were breaking up at the time, but that mattered less than the running away. After me she had a few young lovers and longer relationship with a Vietnamese doctor but never married. She ran an alcoholic ward at the state mental hospital and raised the daughter of her daughter who died in a car accident at 34. I still have her rubber dinosaur.

In Grants Pass, Oregon, the managing editor asked me if I knew what a choker-setter was. It was a test of local knowledge. I could not put my finger on the answer I knew. It´s the guy who chains up fallen trees that are winched up hillsides and loaded on logging trucks. “Oh yeah,” I said, “I knew that. It´s in Sometimes a Great Notion, Ken Kesey´s shot at the great American novel.” Kesey had lived west of Eugene and been almost person number one in the counterculture. The editor had never heard of him. The business was dying.

But I was an army veteran, who wrote drivel for a division newspaper in Korea. Small town publishers like that because they think you are safe, used to writing stuff the military found inoffensive. They just wanted copy to go between the ads. Plus, I was fresh from the plains where feathers went mostly unruffled; people were polite; and often cultivated inoffensiveness. Anyway that´s what a lot of West Coasters imagined. The reality is different. You get in trouble everywhere if you tell the truth in public.

But finally, I was there, in Oregon. I had a BS in journalism from the University of Colorado, and experience. I could take photographs and do the darkroom in a pinch. I´m not sure exactly how it happened. I was coming down the coast after stops in Newport and Lincoln City. In the middle of the Oregon Coast is Florence, home of the Siuslaw News a weekly of no particular repute. It was a retirement town in 1981 of about 4,000 mostly Californians. All around it lumber and paper mills were shutting down. Locals were heading for Wyoming oil fields for work.

It is beautiful near Florence with sand dunes along the coast for miles; dramatic headlands dropping to the sea; small, clean freshwater lakes inland and forest everywhere. Born in near Chicago, raised in Denver, I always wanted to live by the sea. The interview was strange. The old guy, with a mangled left hand and poor sentence structure, who owned the paper drove me around town in his RV. We made weird conversation not having anything to do with my notion of newspapering. His son who was with us and would be publisher very soon.

It was getting dark early in November, and I had almost 200 miles back to Medford. I could see the dunes just off Highway 101 and hear waves of the Pacific Ocean. Here it was-- something I had always wanted.

Roads to the beach were sandy with some deep loose patches that might bury you up to an axle. My Subaru had four-wheel drive, and I used it to get over hummocks that got bigger closer to the beach. The final one was maybe 25-feet high. It took two runs to get over it, the second one in low-range first gear. On the other sider it was cold, wild and loud. The stars were brighter than I expected, the sky endless. No one and no lights up the beach in either direction. Wave sounds and a cold wind filled the universe.

I didn´t sleep well, excited, but worried about the tide of which I knew nothing. The beach was flat about foe about 20 yards to the water´s edge, a quarter of it already wet from receding waves. A foot or two of higher tide would cover beach quickly. Awakening early, I was eager to flee waves that had already shrunk the flat sand by a third.

I head back up a little up to get some speed, remembering the night before. But I can´t make it even in four-wheel drive low range. Not enough runup to get into second gear. I back down further eager to keep moving and not sink all four wheels in the loose sand of the hill or the back two in the wet sand of the shrinking beach. Next time a get more speed but still lose it all before cresting the dune.

So, a little further back, but still no go. I owe $2,600 on the car. It would be a rusted hulk after half a day in the sea. Waves would pull it in deep quickly anyway. If I back it up too far the rear tires might sink into the wet sand. Then I am cooked.

Panic now. Does my bitter escape end in stupidity-fueled doom? What the hell. I backup further than a calm man would. The waves almost touch the rear tires. I try to floor it carefully to keep all the wheels turning. I get into second just before it starts to bog down. Barely, the car creeps over the dune. I am saved. Well, safer anyway. Almost free.

The next day the Florence paper calls back, and I have the job. It is four days since the election. I am thinking how courageous and wise I was to just run away, risk it all, for any different life. But I never really believed it. It isn´t me. I have to be desperate to leave home, beaten away by depression and failure. Fortunately, they have always been plentiful.

I would only be at that paper a year before being fired over a story which never ran about a city councilwoman busted for drunk driving who was nevertheless quite capable of cowing the cops and my publisher. It was the only time I ever made any money in journalism, two grand to go away quietly. Someone had to.

So, I ran away again. It always had to work. In three days, I had a job in the Mojavi desert on a daily in a town in which no one wanted to live. The Navy developed bombs there, yes, of course, in the desert. I would be there three years before running away from newspapers altogether and driving the same car again loaded with all I own to a weird little bohemian town on the coast above San Francisco. Eventually I ran from there too.

But in my Oregon year, I was best man to the guy I replaced at the paper. We chased women together for several months while he worked on a fishing boat to make some real money. One day he found ´The One´ who became his wife. I was best man. Still married. All kids college graduates.

And I met a tall, wise woman in a bar. She was winning a bridge tournament in town that weekend. We went on an eight-month orgy, doing it in the dunes, in the woods, on playground monkey bars, on roadsides, anywhere we could. We skinny dipped in Lake Oswego at 11 p.m. when I drove up to see her. It was mad.

She was a gift, a high school dropout with three kids by two different guys. She was a word lover as well as a bridge champion. An evangelical gathering was advertised on buses in Portland near where she lived, “Fight Oblivion” in three-foot-high letters. She gave me a small brass cigarette case so engraved. It held six joints perfectly for years.

Once we were having lunch with her hairdresser friend from Coos Bay whose daughter was a mud wrestler. “Well at least you found one halfway decent,” she said referring to me sitting across the table. I am like, hey, I´m right here. Next time I saw my girlfriend she had a black T shirt for me with three-inch-high white block letters Halfway Decent. “What about the other half?” so guy in a family car called out once in a state park parking lot. Cracked me up.

She followed me to the desert and landed a job there in an afternoon. I couldn´t do it. I was futureless. We split. Last I heard she was with a six-foot-eight-inch Texan living in Winnemucca.

There were good people in the desert. Scientists up the yinyang and their smart families stuck in the Mojavi perfecting missiles and bombs. I was introduced to one of them. We were lovers for three years. Like everyone she worked for the Naval Weapons Center, the only big employer in town and a sizeable artery of the military industrial complex.

She was a widow with two young kids and had a doctorate in organizational psychology, expertise the Navy badly needed but never heeded. I interviewed her daughter for a weekly personality piece in the paper. Her son crawled all over me when we first met like a needy and clever monkey.

She was a jock too, a cyclist, a kayaker, a hang glider and a mountain biker. There was a group of us. We skied at Mammoth, hiked at Mono Lake, paddled on Lake Isabella, biked in the hills. About 40 of us arranged a backpacked mountain wedding for the core couple of our group--lots of costumes and drugs.

She, a Jewish couple and several others started a Peace and Justice group in town at no small risk to their careers. Several of them opened a safe house for abused women which filled immediately. A group of us campaigned for our buddy to be elected to the Kern County Water Commission, an obscure five-man board most famous for being the real villain in Polanski´s Chinatown. One of the members had to be from the desert. No one knew who he was. He never campaigned and was easily re-elected

It was always hot there. We slept on sheets of 3/4-inch plywood on cinder blocks in her back yard looking up at desert stars that were even brighter in the glow of orgasm.

She was admired and desired by better men than I. Eventually she married a wiry guy who owned a sports shop to the north on the east side of the Sierras. It ended badly, I was told, with him coming on to both the kids and she not knowing what to do.

At 39 I left the desert and journalism with the same $1,200 I arrived with and the same car now with a second engine in it and 250,000 miles on it. The next year turned out to be one of the best of my life. No more newspapering. I went to Bolinas, unique town north of San Francisco inhabited by poets, trustfunders, posers and ex-and-current smalltime drugs dealers. An Army buddy lived I reconnected with lived there. He and his other Irish friend, both ex-alcoholics read Jung´s Man and His Symbols there.

I had met a great woman in the bar there and drove 800 miles from the desert and back on many weekends for three years. She and the seacoast town were my sanctuary in those desert years. Yes, I was cheating on everyone. It was survival. Since then, I have tried and, yes, probably failed, to never make more than one woman at a time miserable.

I wrote a mystery novel in Bolinas about Oregon and how you never really know the secrets about people hidden in forests. In North Dakota you can drive 100 miles to an assignation and sit down in a Ramada Inn bar right next to your neighbor.

In Bolinas I also built a simi-complicated mound septic system to bring my girlfriend´s house up to code. With a legal septic and two adjacent parcels she bought when her uncle died, the 600-square-foot place was said to be worth $990,000 at one. She originally bought it with a twenty-grand settlement for a car wreck and worked for years as a six-dollar-an-hour assistant at the local child-care coop for years. Two years later she was the director.

The novel was based on The Critique of Pure Reason by Immanuel Kant, the man who saved modern philosophy from the English sceptics by giving away the whole store of reality and dealing only with the illusions human perception produces—phenomena. After rewriting the first six chapters four times, I realized the book was getting worse. The septic system was far more rewarding.

My partner was a very smart very beautiful Portuguese high school dropout from Rhode Island with a terribly disabled 13-year-old daughter and two sons from different men. I didn´t run away for two more great years of Martinis, dope, sex, the sea and her. Her daughter was in an institution by then, and she was raising a granddaughter, the product of her son and her ex-husband´s ex-girlfriend. Her aim was to see that the girl and not her father will get the house.

Running away is the only trick I have, one I never sought or developed but have always relied on. It´s not even me. Until I was seven, I never wanted to leave our home on a suburban street outside Chicago. It had everything, everything I knew, everything I needed. I wanted never to leave.

For years I didn´t know why we had to leave. It turned out to be a blonde bombshell my father got caught screwing. She was in the church. Her husband was in Korea. Bad all around. My mother, God knows how, stuck it out, and we moved 1,000 miles away. The marriage ended seven years later anyway.

Maybe that´s how I picked up running away. Maybe not. I always felt I came by it myself. But it isn´t rare, or bold, brave—quite the opposite. I have always had a toxic mixture of envy and pity for those you don´t do it.

I spent 13 years in a 200-square-foot apartment in Marin County, one of the richest places in California, trying to earn my security with a corporate job. Tax Law: a million pages of text, changing every day, a place of studied obscurity—Kafka land.

It paid more than journalism although less important by magnitudes. Ultimately it and five years as a maintenance man after the corporation was sold lifted me out of the precariat.

The corporate gig, however, included allowed basketball games at lunch and the chasing of many many interesting divorced Marin County women who were just as lost as I was.

I got lonely. I finally found one. A good one. We have lasted, but…

I ran away from the United States as soon as I had the chance, and then Britain too. I would do it today, and tomorrow if there is one. Yeah, maybe. But desperation is never planned. It could be different now. Sure it could.

Much of the world in on the run now and many more soon will be—climate change, poverty, war, malignant regimes. They are not running from an acquired aversion to home but because they must flee theirs. We share only the running. Will there be friends and lovers and crap jobs to sustain them as there was for me. I fear not.

*Well, the moral of the story  
The moral of this song  
Is simply that one should never be  
Where one does not belong  
So when you see your neighbor carrying somethin'  
Help him with his load  
And don't go mistaking Paradise  
For that home across the road*

*The last line of Bob Dylan´s The Ballard of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest*