What My Eyes Can’t See

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I’m writing you to catch you up on places I’ve been.*

Stan has been gone for fifty-three days. I have been home bound for fifty-seven years. Yet in nearly two months, I’ve been to twenty-nine different states. I’ve even been waterskiing in the Gulf of Mexico.

If I were actually there to see it, I’d describe it all to you. I’d tell you, maybe, about the way the air in South Carolina has that soft, sweet smell of honeysuckle flowers when a breeze comes through. I might even tell you about the nightlife of New Orleans; the driving rhythms of Cajun music, accordions and violins and the triangle, spices like file’ and fully ripened cayenne peppers simmering in gumbo, and sweat creating a passion only New Orleans can know. And in Texas, how I possibly sped through prairies on a horse his owners called Dreamer. But I can’t. I wasn’t there, but Stan was. There’re even pictures to prove it.

Several months back, the doctors told Stan and me “around winter.” So Stan and I devised a plan: Stan will be my eyes. For seventy-five days, Stan will visit all the places of interest to me and report what he has seen.

Stan told me that growing up, he never really had a chance to travel much. His father died when he was very young, around four years old. His mother, in the only way she could cope with his death, became an alcoholic. At the age of eight, Stan was grocery shopping for his mother, his younger sister, and himself. His teenage years were spent washing cars, mowing lawns, or whatever he could do to make money to add to the family income. His mother worked as a waitress; she wasn’t bringing home much money. One week after Stan’s eighteenth birthday, his mother died from liver complications. Stan never had a chance.

This expedition, thirty-eight years later, is the first chance Stan has had to really see the world outside of his responsibilities.

For the first thirty-one days of the expedition, I received a letter a day from Stan. On day thirty-two, the letters started to arrive every other day, sometimes as long as three days. Today was the first letter in nearly a week.

*You held this letter, probably got excited but there’s nothing else inside it.*

Jonesy, the mail carrier, knew. He’d say, “Here ya go, Miss Cassidy. Looks like more
pictures!” And I’d tear open the envelope while Jonesy rolled me out into the sunlight. I’d read Stan’s letter, and while Jonesy was looking at the pictures, I was in them. Tennessee’s valleys, the Appalachian Mountains, the Missouri River; I could even smell the salt off the Colorado River as we hiked along side it.

At night, I like to spread out Stan’s letters in front of me, placing them in order of when they were written: day one, Seattle; day three, Glacier National Park; day four, still moving east. I place the pictures that came along with the letter next to it and look at them as I read the letter.

Twenty-four days ago, Stan was in Maryland. He went to a restaurant along the beach of the Chesapeake Bay. I had the lemon-pepper baked salmon, some honey glazed carrots, and a tall glass of white wine. In the mornings, Stan took me out to watch the sunrise as he took these pictures—a brilliant display of red, orange, and yellow fading into a perfect azure blue sky. The salty breeze from the Bay lingered on my clothes for the rest of the day.

Six days ago, I received another letter from Stan. He was in New Mexico, on his way to Arizona. He said he stopped for a quick bite to eat at a restaurant called The Mesa, but no pictures. But his description of the landscape serving as a backdrop for the restaurant was breathtaking. Again, no pictures. However, he did include a postcard of New Mexico. On the front was a cactus wrapped in a Navajo blanket wearing a sombrero. In gold cursive letters, it said, “Welcome to the Land of Enchantment.” On the back, Stan didn’t write anything. Not even a “Wish you were here.”

Two hours ago, Jonesy delivered the mail. Stan’s letter finally came, but it was a lot lighter than his previous letters.

Stan always had a way with words. He used to read me his poetry on the nights when the pain was just too unbearable. It helped with keeping my mind off my hips. Stan’s words were better than Percocets, Valium. However, since that letter I received on the thirty-first day, my hips have been flaring up. Today is the pinnacle of pain that was sure to come eventually, the semblance of a thousand bee stings.

Stan mailed this latest letter from San Francisco. I can tell by the postmark— a streetcar inked via red stamp. It took me a second to figure out what it was because it seemed as if the
stamper didn’t quite get it on the first try. When I opened the envelope, the words were written in black ink instead of the blue ink Stan started with. Maybe his blue pen ran out of ink...

When I unfolded the piece of paper I pulled out of the envelope, I’m not sure why I flinched. Maybe it was the color of ink; maybe it was the tension wound in Stan’s words uncoiling as the letter unfolded. The first time I read this one, I didn’t believe Stan had written it. I checked the handwriting with prior letters. It was a match; his Rs were not written in cursive while the other twenty-five letters of the alphabet were. That, to me, was the dead giveaway. My gaze rested on the R in “words.” It seemed as if an eternity passed while I stared blankly at that R, but it was only several seconds. I knew because I was holding my breath. When my vision faltered, I snapped out of my trance.

Today skies are painted colors of a cowboy’s cliché. And strange how clouds that look like mountains in the sky are next to mountains anyway.

I never envisioned California to be the way it is. Apparently, everything is dull and drab. The sun reflects off the haze, creating an eerie, dirty brown look to the sky. As it breaks the horizon, the sun is a deep blood red, like the color of a scarf tied around Old Hoss’s neck that keeps getting tighter and tighter, until he becomes a different person all together.

Ever lie on your back and try to give clouds shape and meaning? One cloud I never saw was one in the shape of a mountain. I paused at the end of Stan’s sentence about the clouds and mountains. I tried to both picture the shape of the cloud and give it meaning. Maybe Stan’s eyes were under strain from all the traveling he’s done. Of the pictures I’ve seen, it doesn’t seem that everything is gradually starting to look the same. It could also be that Stan had a little too much to drink before he went out sightseeing. He always did have a penchant for having that one last Gin & Tonic that pushes him over the edge. The more Stan would drink, however, the more he had a way with words.

I hope Stan is all right. I worry about him.

You should have seen that sunrise with your own eyes. It brought me back to life.

I used to think that once you’ve seen one sunrise, you’ve seen them all. I guess I was wrong. Apparently, there’re sunrises that can completely change one’s perspective. Stan seems to have found that certain sunrise.
Today I finally overcame trying to fit the world inside a picture frame.

Just before Stan left, we tried to guess how much film was going to be needed to picture everything. The first month or so of the expedition, the amount of pictures Stan took was astonishing. I couldn’t believe just how much of one landscape could fit into one three inch by five inch picture. There were scenes of what looked like endless rolling hills of Ohio covered with tall oak trees and sunflowers, vast farmlands of the Midwest strewn with rows of cornstalks, and numerous rocky peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains, each scene placed in its own picture. Stan had a very keen sense of all things of beauty. He always did.

On day thirty-six, I received a letter with fewer pictures than prior letters. Stan’s focus was mostly on an orange grove in Florida. In one of the pictures, Stan had zoomed in on one lone orange barely hanging on to the tree. In another shot, Stan had taken a picture of just the sign that pointed the way to Disney Land; not the actual park, just the sign. This trend remained for the rest of the pictures I received from Stan until today’s letter arrived. In Winterset, Iowa, he took a picture of only the sign outside of the house where John Wayne was born, “Birthplace of John Wayne” it said, carved into wood. The view eventually outgrew the picture.

No more 3X5’s.

It looks like the world has caught up with Stan. Maybe he ran out of film, maybe this is just too hard for him. There won’t be any more rows of Oak trees lining roads of the South, no snow-capped mountain peaks, no pictures of the moon’s reflection on still lakes. All that is left is the imagination and my trust in it.

You’ll be with me next time I go outside.

Since I’ve known Stan, he has given me more than I could ever have asked for. He’s been with me through the hospital visits where the doctors poked and prodded me in places that have been numb for as long as I can remember. On the nights when the pain became too unbearable, he would reposition me until it started to subside. Stan is finally able to live the life he has always wanted, a life he has so very much deserved. And I couldn’t be any happier for him.

Stan once told me about wanting to build a cabin tucked away somewhere in the Redwood trees of Northern California. It has been a dream of his since he saw the big timbers on the cover of a National Geographic when he was seven. And when we go for walks amid the
350-foot tall giants, I won’t need any pictures, any words to tell me what I’m seeing. Thanks to Stan, I’m already there.

*This and other italicized passages from the song “3x5,” written by John Mayer, from his album “Room For Squares.”*