

PREFACE

I had been studying long-term backpackers for many years before I first ran across a family with school-aged children backpacking around the world together. It was 2009 and I was doing research for a book on travel and technology when I encountered Craig, a middle-class father from the Washington, DC area who was blogging about his year-long round-the-world journey with his wife, their eleven-year-old son, and their thirteen-year-old daughter. Up to that point, most of the travelers I had followed and interviewed in my research were in their twenties or thirties, young singles or couples who were taking time to see the world before settling down with a job, kids, and a mortgage.

The very phrase “settling down” captures a deeply held, but not necessarily accurate, assumption that family life takes place *in place*. Despite the vast amount of evidence to the contrary, we generally imagine modern families to be geographically anchored in homes, neighborhoods, and communities. There are exceptions, of course. Military families, diplomats and missionaries, corporate expat families and new age hippies, families whose survival requires seasonal or forced migration. But we tend to consider these movements as a sacrifice, an exception, or a temporary disruption to the otherwise stable nature of family life. Craig’s family, and the many worldschooling families I met while conducting research for this book, throw those assumptions into question. Their journeys are not a last hurrah before settling into a geographically confined life with kids, school, and work. Nor are they a temporary vacation from everyday life. These families are living every part of their lives on the road.

When I met Craig, I knew immediately that I wanted to study families like his in greater depth. Since I was already immersed in another book project, I put the idea on hold, but these mobile families were never far from my mind. I returned to the idea in 2013, when I moved with my husband Martin and our son Elliot to Rovaniemi, Finland for

six months. I was a Fulbright scholar at the University of Lapland, and we enrolled Elliot, who was eight years old at the time, in a local Waldorf school. I'd had some experience with alternative schooling as a child, but this was my first experience as a parent sending my child to anything but the local public school. It struck me that even in a place like Finland, where the public education system is literally the best in the world, some parents were seeking educational experiences for their children beyond the conventional classroom.

This time in Finland was also something of a test run. I had a notion of doing ethnographic fieldwork, ideally *as* one of these traveling families. I had a sabbatical scheduled two years later, which would give me enough time to design the research, start the online ethnography, and then dedicate several months to mobile fieldwork traveling the world as a family. Martin was on board immediately, but we wanted to gauge how Elliot fared in Finland before proposing the idea of long-term travel to him. Despite some early culture shock and challenges with the language barrier, he seemed to be thriving, so one afternoon I asked Elliot if he would be up for doing fieldwork with me on the road for a year. After I asked the question, he quietly got up from the table and came back with a piece of paper and a pen. "Let's start writing down all the places we want to go!" he said.

Elliot was ten years old when we launched our trip. He proved to be a stellar traveler and an invaluable research assistant. His enthusiasm and curiosity propelled our trip and my research in many ways. During the months that we were on the road, he was constantly on the lookout for other families with kids his age whom I could approach for an interview. And during those interviews, he played with the kids while I talked with their parents. Martin, for his part, was also an insightful research partner and would accompany me on interviews as well. Although he is not trained as a social scientist, he has a keen sociological imagination and a talent for asking just the right question or probing follow-up.

My decision to involve my family in my research was inspired by both logistical and epistemological aspects of the project. According to anthropologist Susan Frohlick, the myth of the solitary fieldworker setting off alone to collect knowledge in some remote place has had its day. Frohlick's decision to bring her spouse and two young children with her to conduct ethnographic research at a Mount Everest base camp

pioneered a new imaginary of accompanied fieldwork. Ethnographers, mothers especially, are increasingly unwilling to bracket off, erase, or leave their own families behind when conducting and writing their research. And given the nature of my research topic, Martin's and Elliot's participation was not just incidental but absolutely crucial to the kinds of data I was able to collect and the insights I was able to elicit from our shared experience. This project owes an enormous debt to both of them.

Yet the project was shaped not just by the family members I brought with me, but also by those I left behind. Just as I started the research, my father began exhibiting symptoms that were originally thought to be the effect of Parkinson's disease but were later diagnosed as Progressive Supranuclear Palsy (PSP), a degenerative neurological condition that affects gross and fine motor skills. At the beginning of my sabbatical, we moved to New Mexico to be closer to my parents for a while before starting our trip. It was not lost on me that just as I was launching an ethnographic journey around the world to study mobile families' quest for the good life, my own father's quality of life was deteriorating in parallel to his diminishing ability to move or to move "correctly."

Early in the fieldwork, it was my father who drove Martin, Elliot, and me to the airport for the first leg of our trip. At that point, his symptoms were minor but worrying. His gait had become heavy and slow. At times, his body moved involuntarily; at other times, it refused to move at all no matter how hard he concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Not knowing how much longer my father would be able to travel prompted my parents to take a couple of trips—a vacation in Italy with my sister's family and a visit to Mexico with friends. But a few months later, my father was no longer able to drive, then no longer able to walk without the assistance of a cane and then a walker, and then no longer able to stand or walk at all.

Like the families in this study, my father always dreamed of traveling, and while we were never that rebel family that lived on the road, we traveled our fair share. We moved house nine times and lived in five different cities during my childhood, a biographical fact that usually leads people to assume my father was in the military. In fact, he was a Lutheran minister, a family counselor, and a crisis mediator, a career that required both a deep commitment to local communities and a significant amount of mobility. In his role as a crisis mediator, he traveled all

over the country to help churches in turmoil and communities in grief. For example, he was sent to New York just days after the September 11, 2001 attacks to provide trauma counseling.

My mother was an educator, so summers were available for traveling. June, July, and August were given over to trips up north to visit relatives, road trips to the southwest to nourish our souls, mission trips Mexico to bring donations of clothing and shoes to an orphanage, and camping trips that fit our family's modest budget. Later, my parents' itineraries became more ambitious, in no small part because Martin and I moved (and moved and moved) all over the world. They would come visit us in every new place—Singapore, Italy, England, Finland—each of them carrying nothing more than a small carry-on suitcase.

As my father's physical mobility declined, his imagination began to fill in the gaps. He would dream aloud about traveling to Italy one more time, restoring an antique MG convertible for joyrides, hitching an Airstream to the van and driving cross-country. His wishes revealed just how deeply embedded the dream of mobility is in our visions of the good life. In the last chapter of his life, the world came to him. Unable to leave home much in his final months, he was blessed with a cosmopolitan network of friends and caregivers from different corners of the world who circulated in and out of the house, bringing with them the stories that animated my dad's imagination. He told me that it wasn't really the traveling that he craved, but the stories. I've dedicated this book to him and to my mother because it is a book of stories: stories about travel, about family, and about our collective future.