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Souvenir

Kathryn Rhett
Gettysburg College

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Souvenir

Description

A collection of autobiographical essays

Souvenir, a collection of autobiographical essays rooted in the present, investigates travel, staying put, and how it is that our experience of *being here right now* includes so much of *being elsewhere at another time*. Rhett reconciles present to past in serious encounters with birth and death, alongside lighter observations. In a world that makes no sense except the sense we make of it, *Souvenir* plays with the dynamics of home and away to represent the fullness of daily life. [From the publisher]

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Comments

One of Professor Kathryn Rhett's essays, *Blue Coast*, is available above for download.

Blue Coast

After my parents divorced, my sister and I didn't live with our father anymore, and for a stretch of our teenaged years, he took us on edifying trips in August. Who were we, and where did we belong in the world? Through traveling we would learn. The summer I turned sixteen, we went to France.

One night we slept at a train station. Heads on our duffel bags, we slept on benches near the tracks. When the sun rose a number of Muslim men unrolled rugs on the nearby grass and began to pray, facing their spiritual home. We were now in our spiritual home, Europe. (Defined broadly enough to include England, it was our ancestral home, too.) Inside the station, in the high-ceilinged waiting room, men in rumpled business clothes performed ablutions, slapping spicy aftershave on their necks. I remember the sound of a man singing as he slapped his neck, against the huff and release of espresso machines.

We took a walk behind the station, down to a wide canal, and imagined how we could ride a barge or live on a houseboat. I had read *Dove*, the true story of a family that sailed around the world, and asked my father if we could do that, half wishing for a reprieve from high school, half wishing to become as sinewy and worldly as the boy on the book's cover, who stood on the bow calmly gazing at Polynesia. We had the potential to be adventurers, having slept in the open air.

My father had bought us each a duffel bag before the trip, and instructed us sternly that we could bring no other luggage. I loved the feeling of having all that I needed in one bag, at hand. I looped my arms through the straps and carried it like a sausage-y backpack. We were in a small town in Provence, standing on a train platform in the morning. Headed for the coast, land of the Cannes Film Festival, and Princess Grace of Monaco. Those words *the coast* conjured up a glitter of possibility—like a film strip flicking across projection light, like tiara diamonds—of far horizon, from where we stood on the dry bank of a brown canal. Patricia Hampl called the Côte d’Azur, “The ultramarine basin of what used to be called Western Civilization.” We boarded a train for the source.



That night we drove around the port of Nice. There were fishing boats all rigged up with red nets and gear, and then, anchored in deeper water, white yachts and cruise ships, their golden windows like party lights strung against the black sea. We wound up a hill above the port, steeply, to our hotel, and then explored, in the dark, the plush trimmed lawns of the fancier hotel next door. Lighted paths curved through its sloping property, where we stood on stone stairs to look down at the boats. I felt smugly adult that I could appreciate the view, could appreciate the difference between the two hotels, ours being modest but a better deal. We could sneak our way into this fancy South of France; we could stay in the cheap hotel and then sweep down into the city like anybody else.

My father drove us down the Promenade des Anglais, the route along the water built in the 1820s by English expatriates as a walkway for taking the sea air. Near the center of town a lit carousel turned and a band played in a gazebo. We followed a footpath toward the music. I wore a black gauze sundress, with straps that tied at the shoulder, and high-heeled slides bought in Paris. The slides had plastic heels, and cost only eight dollars, but I felt stylish, having pulled this ensemble out of my humble bag. I also wore my first real tan, from sunbathing devotedly using Bain de Soleil orange gelée

(more sophisticated than Coppertone), burning and peeling while I read magazines. It is strange to be a teenage girl, to be looked at. When you are skinny and have clear skin and are sixteen years old, it is not delusional to imagine that boys are looking at you. They use their imaginative x-ray vision to see through your clothes, and this seemed natural, as if I had been growing up solely to arrive at this moment of being measured for the shine of my hair and eyes and teeth and lips. The small curve of my breasts. The swing of my dress. The crunch of my heels on the gravel. My every step was registered by a line of slouching boys in the park, as I moved into the halo of music and light and stood there with my father and younger sister.

We watched the crowd of people dancing to rock music, the electric guitar incongruous with the Victorian gazebo. A boy appeared. He stood in front of my father, asking permission to dance with me. How foreign his manners were—a boy at home would ask me directly. He wore a midnight blue button-down shirt, untucked, and black trousers, not jeans. My father said yes, waved him toward me, and the boy took my hand, leading me to the floor. He had a hairless chest, his shirt unbuttoned one more than the boys at home would. I smiled over at my dad and at my sister, who was thirteen and might have been wistful, or bored. After a few songs, my father took her to Festival des Glaces, reputed to offer one hundred flavors of ice cream. They would come back in an hour.

Then the boy walked me off the dance floor and picked a flower. He slid it into the teeth of my hair comb, and led me into the shadows on the lawn, beyond the spotlight palms. In the liquid green of the shadow, I felt adrenalized, not knowing what would happen, not having known this could happen, a boy seizing me from the evening's aimless family narrative of strolling the city. The boy kissed me—he pulled my hair straight down in back to lift my chin and bit my lip—and said we should go somewhere. I would have gone almost anywhere. To be chosen by a French boy was superior to being chosen by an American boy. (I had studied French in high school rather than Spanish—only years later did it occur to me that I had favored the language that seemed more upper class.) The boy spoke urgent bits of sentences in French and ran his hands over me,

me wearing nothing but underwear and a dress that could float right over my head.

We crossed the Promenade, took steps down to the beach. When my plastic heels caught on the stones, he held me up. The beach had no lights. Low waves broke with a slap. A voice shouted for him, and he waved. A pack of boys came over. We need a place to go, he seemed to be saying to them, and they all talked rapidly and then he turned to me and explained that his friend had an apartment nearby. He named a street, pointed behind the park. One of his friends said in English, "You like records, yes? We have a lot of records, just come." In the dark I could see the gloss of their eyes hunting over me while the one boy kept his arm around my bare shoulders. I had an image of what it would be like, them doing it to the American girl while the record turned around and around. Turning, I moved quickly toward the steps as they shouted to me—"Please, c'mon"—and the one boy was polite enough to walk me coldly back to the edge of the park. I sat on a bench. When my sister came back, I said, "What kind of ice cream did you have?" I shut up that sequence in a cabinet in my head with all of the other sequences like that, which occur when you are a girl who is entranced with being wanted. And I chose to recollect instead my gauze dress and Parisian heels and a pink flower in my hair.



One day we drove east on the Bord de Mer, the low road bordering the sea, and then swung up onto the hilly peninsula of Cap d'Antibes, driving past walled estates with topiary shrubs. We paused respectfully at the gates to a renowned destination of the wealthy, the Hôtel du Cap-Eden-Roc. My father respected wealth, and the ingenuity it implicitly expressed. He had taken us to the mansions of Newport, and the Hearst Castle in California, directing us to appreciate properly the swimming pool laid with handpainted Italian tiles or a curving balustrade carved from a single piece of wood, or the model railroad built for the children by the man who had built the actual American railroad, Andrew Carnegie, the Scottish immigrant

who created the steel industry from nothing. The rich were smarter than we were, or their ancestors had been, and we could at least show our intelligence by admiring their work.

We were supposed to be impressed, though subtly. Just the summer before, standing in the cavernous Great Hall of The Breakers, the seventy-room summer cottage of Cornelius Vanderbilt II, my father had seemed annoyed that I wasn't sufficiently awed by the features the tour guide was lavishly explaining. So I dropped my jaw. This struck me as the right way to show marvel and astonishment at the forty-five-foot ceiling, and the items actually owned by Marie Antoinette. I would please my father by showing an acute understanding of the importance of all this 1890s stuff. Cornelius Vanderbilt II had been President and Chairman of the New York Central Railroad. Did I care? I probably cared more about whether my hair scarf matched my T-shirt. My father snapped me out of my act. "Shut your mouth," he hissed, "Don't stand around gawking like that." (I'm still startled, still ashamed, when I recall it.) I was gawking, like a hick, a country bumpkin, an idiot, a farm girl from Kansas at the World's Fair, a tourist. I shut my mouth. My face grew hot, so I turned away. I was supposed to be appreciative of the houses of the rich, yet also—somehow—at home. Maybe our Colonial American lineage had cast us in the role of fallen nobility. We were supposed to follow the general principles for traveling, too. Never lose your cool. Always blend in. Act like you belong.

In France at the Eden-Roc, my father, sister and I stayed in our car. Presumably it wasn't a place one just strolled into. We noted the groomed flowerbeds and the driveway rolling beyond our reach. We imagined celebrities drinking champagne on a terrace. Then we drove to Saint-Tropez and drank Coca-Cola in a café and my father bought me a chocolate-brown T-shirt with cap sleeves that said Saint-Tropez in white Art Deco lettering. (I wore it for two summers after, feeling surely sophisticated.)



Nice was glamorous and mild, with its tropical gardens, blue sea, and old stucco buildings in softened yellows and ivories. During the day, we drove around exploring with the windows rolled down, and when the traffic jammed up, my father would tip his head out the window and yell, "*Qu'est-ce qui arrive?*" "What's going on?" He barely spoke French, though he liked trying. He had visited Cannes on shore leave. A navigator, he flew off the carrier *USS Forrestal* during 1961, recording each day's landings in a black leather flight log in impeccable capital letters. (He had worked as a draftsman over college summers, and never lost the handwriting.) On leave, he and his buddies stayed in an apartment next to a mansion, which they wandered into one evening as there seemed to be an open cocktail party going on, only to find themselves in a plushly decorated whorehouse. Thereafter, the American naval officers and the prostitutes spent their days on the beach together, the prostitutes practicing English, the naval officers ogling bare breasts. He still did that, checking out the topless beach scene as he drove. He would veer over to the shore side of the road until I yelled at him, "Hey, *qu'est-ce qui arrive?*"

We drove the high corniche to Monaco and walked the harbor, my father pointing out the equipment and appointments of the best sailboats. Trooping down rows of luxury cruisers, we were startled to see Jacques Cousteau's boat, the *Calypso*, unpretentious and workmanlike among the yachts. My sister and I had seen many episodes of *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*, with the old Frenchman picking his way across a boat deck crowded with equipment, explaining what he would do, and then falling backwards into the sea in his scuba gear. Cousteau, like the founder of Club Med, occupied an ascetic niche of French culture, in which one pursued pleasure in a very specific way, involving minimal bikinis, fresh air, hard beds and communal activities. (The official purpose of Club Med, founded in 1950, was "to develop an appreciation for the outdoor life and the practice of physical education and sports.") In 1943 Cousteau had coined the aqualung breathing apparatus so that divers no longer had to wear heavy helmets. He could swim with a camera, giving us a dreamy, fishlike view of the sea. A millionaire had given

the money to buy *Calypso*, a former minesweeper, which Cousteau outfitted with a lab and underwater television gear. Not that you'd guess its value, looking at the 400-ton beat-up boat.

We walked on, noticing the offbeat now as we crossed the parking lot, smiling at a VW camper van painted in a tie-dye pattern, petting a cat on a leash. Cousteau was the antidote to the garish casinos sitting squat and beckoning at water's edge, and to the aristocratic boutiques and mansions perched above.

We could never fit in, in France, except in a France devoted to science, and earthy satisfactions, rather than money. Even in our best dresses and sandals, my sister and I were not dressed as well as French girls were, with their hair in neat braids, their collared shirts crisp and tucked in. American preppiness had not infiltrated Europe yet, so our usual tennis shirts and shorts seemed boyish and sloppy as streetwear. I wanted to be crisp and tucked in, and had a sudden desire for outfits—the pale pink sweater to match the pale pink jeans in the window of Courrèges was irresistible—or maybe just a longing to fit in.

In fact we didn't have much money, and those outfits would never be mine. We had slept in the train station, and one night at a restaurant we couldn't cover the check. We were by the port of Nice, sitting at a sidewalk table, and when the bill was presented, my father realized he was short. Credit cards weren't used then so often; he must have needed to pay in francs. So he raised his eyebrows, stuffed his wallet back in the pocket of his khakis, and disappeared inside the restaurant. My sister and I sat hunched and worried, wondering if we would be washing dishes, or taken to the police station. Our father loved breaking the rules—in our early childhood he had been offered membership in the Cumberland Lawn Tennis Club in Hampstead, England, after posing as a competitor in the French Open—but money was money. We cautiously looked over at the lit entranceway. Our father waved us in. Come in, come in, he was waving, and then he was standing with his arm around the restaurant owner's shoulder, and we were all staring at a plaque on the wall of the back dining room. "The Cornell School of Hotel and Restaurant Management," the plaque read. Our father had earned

his doctorate in philosophy at Cornell. "Isn't this amazing," he was saying, "the owner's son has just graduated from Cornell. We've been talking about Ithaca." Drawing us toward him, he said proudly, "My girls were born there."

Soon we were eating flaming ice cream crêpes, and the next day we visited the owner at his villa high above Nice. The Mediterranean lay before us in a sweep of blue.



The Hôtel du Cap-Eden-Roc, set on two dozen acres of ornamental gardens, had been built in 1863 as a mansion. A hotel as of 1870, it drew Americans after World War I, when the rich expatriates Sara and Gerald Murphy rented it for the summer, the off-season at that time. Twenty years after I'd first seen the hotel, I paused again outside its stone gates, with my two children in the back seat, my husband beside me. I didn't get out of the car this time either. I had come to see where the Riviera had been invented as a literary outpost.

F. Scott Fitzgerald cast the Hôtel du Cap as the Hôtel des Etrangers in his novel *Tender Is the Night*. As characters, Gerald and Sara became an American psychiatrist and his wife, Dick and Nicole Diver. In the novel, Dick and Nicole seem so entirely comfortable with themselves and their station in life, and maybe it is their comfort that fascinated me as I read both the biographical and fictional stories of their lives—not so much the money itself as the way they felt at home with it, their happy matter-of-factness about how to live and where they belong. On a shopping expedition, Nicole contentedly buys: "colored beads, folding beach cushions, artificial flowers, honey, a guest bed, bags, scarfs, love birds, miniatures for a doll's house . . . a dozen bathing suits, a rubber alligator, a travelling chess set of gold and ivory, big linen handkerchiefs . . . two chamois leather jackets of kingfisher blue and burning bush from Hermes . . ." In contrast to the fledgling film star who accompanies her and buys a "sensible" two dresses, two hats, and four pairs of shoes, Nicole's shopping expresses an infinity of money. "For her sake," Fitzgerald

writes, "trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California . . . and link belts grew link by link in factories . . ."

Fitzgerald didn't grow up rich. By the time he was two years old, his father's furniture factory in St. Paul, Minnesota, had failed, his father had lost a job as a wicker furniture salesman, and the family had moved to Buffalo for his father's new job as salesman for Proctor & Gamble. Fired from that job in 1908, when Fitzgerald was fourteen, he would not be successful in business again. When Fitzgerald's first novel *This Side of Paradise* sold well in 1920, he did not exactly display an ease with wealth: he used five dollar bills to light cigars, and called for hotel bellboys to bathe him.

With my husband and children, I planned to see the famous hotel, then find the beach the Murphys frequented, La Garoupe. In *Tender Is the Night*, the Hôtel des Etrangers has a small beach, from which Dick Diver carefully rakes the stones and seaweed each morning, creating an eccentric idyll by the sea. In fact, the Hôtel du Cap occupied a cliff-top, and the beach lay a half mile away over the peninsula's hills. La Garoupe was an unappreciated stretch of sand in the 1920s, with forested hills rising on three sides behind it and a clear view of the sea straight ahead. The Antibes peninsula was wild and undeveloped then, traversed only by unpaved roads. The Murphys bought a house, near the remains of the medieval village of Tarm seven hundred feet over the sea, and called it Villa America. Every morning, Gerald painted in his studio on the grounds while the children had lessons, and Sara planned menus, or consulted with the gardener. Before noon the family and their guests would head down the road to the beach, where everyone sunbathed and swam. The adults sipped chilled sherry under umbrellas. After the beach, the crowd would assemble for lunch on the villa terrace, followed by a siesta, and then an expedition. The children would bathe and eat dinner while the adults dressed for the evening. Gerald would make his own invented cocktails, and a group of friends would settle in for an evening party in the garden. Sara had a shorthand for their evenings, DFG, or Dinner-Flowers-Gala.

The Murphys employed a cook, gardener, studio assistant, nanny, tutor, housekeeper, and driver. At home, in small-town Pennsylvania where my husband and I had settled in as college professors, I read "Dinner-Flowers-Gala" and laughed to think that my version of an evening was Dishes-Garbage-Laundry.

In France, as my husband, children and I pulled into the crowded La Garoupe beach parking lot, a chilled sherry sounded perfect, with the kids squirming in the back seat, disappointed at the rainy weather. I had been hoping to find Villa America with its handpainted stars-and-stripes sign, and to have a sense of the Murphys' existence, which focused on the creative pleasures of art—applied equally to doing calisthenics on the beach, making a painting, organizing a children's scavenger hunt, or hosting twelve for dinner. However easy it was to dismiss them as frivolous and rich, I admired them. It takes grace and energy to confer everyday life with a sense of ceremony.

We couldn't find the villa, among the many busy streets that now crisscross Cap d'Antibes, among the hundreds of villas behind hedges and iron gates, topped with satellite dishes. And La Garoupe beach, raked clean and reveled in during the summer of 1923? La Garoupe beach was gone, as the Murphys knew it, now crammed with private beach-restaurant concerns, with two narrow bits of public beach spliced in. Wooden decks spread out in front of the pricey uninspiring restaurants, with chaise longues and umbrellas for rent. Women emerging from the restaurants after lunch were cheaply dressed up, in gold sandals and skintight clothes. A woman in gold lamé pants carried a cake box, striking the impression that the restaurants were the type you held parties in because of the standard fancy menu and the water view.

We walked a path around the point, where waves crashed against black rocks. I could imagine how the beach would have been lovely, as I looked back from the point at the tight C-shaped cove, the beach punctuated by large rocks at either end, the hills of forest rising behind.

Having paid obeisance to the Eden-Roc, and declining to take any photos of the depressing La Garoupe beach, we drove the

peninsula in what had become a downpour. We ran into a café for Oranginas and beer. I'm sure my father had a beer when he took me and my sister out for sodas; a single glass of beer has a way of smoothing out the afternoon for a traveling parent. We bought vintage postcards of the Côte d'Azur. Three women pose in different seasonal outfits on a 1936 card, advertising the coast as not just for winter visitors, but for spring, fall, and summer, too. In 1936, the year of my father's birth, the Riviera in July was still a fresh idea. Half a century or so later, fast-food restaurants and American-style malls had their place on the coast alongside the yachts and pines and castles. Jets roared low over the ugly rocky beach at Cagnes-sur-Mer, below the landing route for Nice. Our kids picked around litter, finding azure sea glass among stones and wrappers.

A writer can travel in all classes, and yet belongs in none of them, always outside or in disguise, never truly in. Fitzgerald the visitor watched Sara and Gerald Murphy crossing paths in their high garden on a summer afternoon and wrote them into characters. My husband and I finally went to the Eden-Roc for lunch. Indeed, one does not stroll into the place. A kind man in a suit interviewed us at the front door, identifying our leased car in the gravel lot, ascertaining that we had secured a reservation, looking us up and down as we squared our shoulders in our not-so-good best clothes. He swept us in with an arm, free to descend marble steps and occupy a table overlooking the water. Unattainable yachts bobbed. We drank wine and smiled at the limitless sea.

Another day my husband met friends at the Eden-Roc and sat at a table next to the singer Beyoncé. Thereafter, every time we saw her in a magazine or on television, one of us would say, *You ate lunch next to her*. He was the interloper, she the citizen of the terrace overlooking the sea. One day we visited La Garoupe beach and paid the hundred dollars for cushioned lounge chairs, flanked by umbrellas and attended to by waiters bearing trays. We swam in the murky water, and we stood, just as Gerald Murphy had, on the sand and gazed out past the cove to the sea. It was lovely, our Villa America. Later when we drove up into the hills to cook spaghetti

we looked down on the nightly glitter, our view spanning from the Nice observatory to the lighthouse at La Garoupe. As writers we had the elixir: we could imagine our way into the glittering world.



At sixteen, I knew Europe as the model of civilization and myself as a privileged person because I could travel there. A sense of being at home there, begun with a kindergarten year in London, had evolved when I was ten, and my father took us all to Devon, in the west country of England, to see where his ancestors had lived. I didn't know this would be our last family trip, before he and my mother separated. I didn't know that just as my childhood home disappeared, a new sense of home would rise on the horizon.

On our grandfather clock at home, a sun and moon revolved over the face of the clock, which chimed every quarter hour. The lemon sun would fall off to the left, a silver moon rising to take its place. Devon began to rise as an idea, and the Rhettts as a family whose name transcended my lifetime, my country. We stayed in a Victorian wood-shingled inn with deep porches, and vast green lawns. My father showed me a family bible, larger than my mother's law books or the encyclopedias we had at home. I hadn't known what a family bible was. He carefully turned back the leather cover and thick ivory pages, placing his index finger here, and there, on a name.

When my father left our house, he took his clothes, the gold pocket watch under a glass dome on his dresser, and, most noticeably, the grandfather clock. Family tradition dictated that the eldest son would choose among his father's most precious possessions at the time of the father's death, my father told me that year. (As second son, my father had watched his brother Bill choose their father's valuable Vacheron minute repeater watch.) Maybe my father's departure from our household felt like a precursor to death, or his absence was a kind of death to him and to us. What would I remember him by? His two precious possessions were the gold watch and the grandfather clock. "Which would you choose?" he asked me, as I had to stand in for

an eldest son. Today, more conscious of the past, I might ask for the watch, a retirement gift from the railroad for which my great-grandfather worked, having started as a track boy after running away from home. Then, I answered, "the clock," and so my father showed me how to wind it with a key when it ran down, and how to set it in motion again by pulling the pendulum to one side and letting it go. The clock was tall and imposing, as he was. He so admired the craftsmanship of it, from the delicate painting of the pale sun and moon, to the solid brass cylindrical weights, that the clock itself stood as an expression of all he thought proper and well-made in life. Most important, the clock as family heirloom stood for history, the traceable story of a family, in which I was beginning to see my place.

At sixteen, as a lodger in a *château* in Provence where we stayed before heading to the coast, my father, sister, and I sat arrayed on stiff chairs in a formal salon. I accepted the host's offer of a cigarette and glass of wine. My father raised his eyebrows and said nothing. What are you going to do about it, I telegraphed with a smirk. I was just attempting to belong, in one of the strange places he had dragged me to. The end of my childhood education, this would be our last father-daughters trip. Velvet drapes subdued the daylight. Several arrangements of satin-upholstered sofas and chairs gleamed, flanked by musical instruments on stands, presided over by oil portraits framed in gilt. This way of life, gracious and cultured and softened with age, was civilized. The childhood ballet and piano lessons, the adolescent reading of European novels, was supposed to prepare me to sit easily in the satin chair. We made small talk in French with our host.

Later, outside, we whipped off our good manners like costumes to play basketball in the driveway. My father called me fat. I beat him at free throws. No idea could contain us.