

Gazing for Gators

Tuesday, April 15, 2003

4:30 p.m.

We find the cut-off for Highway 10 west and head to the beaches of Destin. The anticipation is growing. Pesach, the children's favorite holiday, is tomorrow. For the past month, Daniel, Sarah and Eli have been studying the Haggadah at school. They learned the wonderful story of how Moses freed the Jewish nation from slavery in Egypt along with the haunting ancient tunes that bring this history into our present-day lives. We brought along a box of their exquisite crafts: a painted *afikoman* cover for protecting the matzah; a plate for the symbolic foods; and even hand-made gilded pillows to lean on. "Yesterday we were slaves. Today we are free," explains Eli, practicing his "leaning back" technique with his hand-crafted purple pillow, much like a monarch.

We call ahead to confirm our reservation at the RV resort and ask for directions. There is precious little time left and we can't afford to make a wrong turn or spin in countless nauseous circles until I decide upon the right exit.

My kids love getting lost at traffic circles and now call this experience the “Roundabout Ride.” Daniel usually notices first, probably because I stick my highlighter in my mouth and then wrap the map around my face while Sam serenely steers us in circles. Daniel then conducts the kids with his baseball cap as they chant, “Round and round and round we go, where we get off, only Mummy knows” At some point I scream “Now!” then Tamar sticks in a “Wheee” as we exit, the RV practically popping a wheelie before it hits straight pavement. I am in no mood for this right now and diligently write down detailed directions.

We pass mile upon mile of hardwood hammock and pine forests, sparkling lakes and a few mysterious black ponds. “Swamps,” we warn the kids. “Keep your eyes peeled ‘cause this is gator country.” Four noses squish against the windows, while eight eyes scan the roadside with great intensity. This obsessive-compulsiveness is from me; as a child on road trips, I could sit for hours scouring the roadways for some mysterious alligator, fox or turtle and I wanted to spot it first. My father would always spot some bizarre animal lying stunned with its legs up in the air but by the time I looked, the mysterious creature was always behind us. Yet Dad gave me hope I may discover one myself. He used to say in his heavily accented English, “Pauline, keep your eyeballs glued to de road.” (And if this was a ploy to keep my older brothers and me from strangling each other in the back seat, it worked.) To this day, I cannot help myself. I must sweep the road with my eyeballs because, who knows, there could be a huge alligator with sharp teeth and a long tail lurking just around the next bend

We cut south at Highway 231 and the excitement is palpable. Looks like this road will take us right to the ocean. The kids are so pumped, they want to change into their bathing suits right away. One small detail; the beach is over fifty miles away. I decide to keep this to myself. I am enjoying their mounting sense of excitement.

I glance at my map and am alarmed to see that Destin is on a thin spit of land that faces inland and the Gulf of Mexico. With my luck, we may not even be on the ocean. We could be on the other side, on the Choctawhatchee Bay overlooking some huge oil freighters and listening to Mike complain about his life being ruined. I was the one who stayed up until 2:00 a.m. night after night trying to plan this trip and I distinctly

remember the website mentioning a private beachfront resort. I feel flushed and rue the day I took the huge responsibility of planning our itinerary.

We stop for gas and after a few Krispy Kremes I feel re-fuelled. How will I ever get through eight days of Pesach without a doughnut? I have survived nearly four decades without tasting a Krispy Kreme and now I find it hard to get through a few hours without that sweet, gooey melt-in-your-mouth taste. With the sugar unleashed into my system, I have new resolve and enlarged hips. When Reb Schwadron blessed me with self-transformation, I wonder if he meant inside and out, because the out is reaching new limits. At least my long, flowing skirts with elastic waists can accommodate my new growth.

Brushing the powdered sugar off my hands, I spy a backpacker standing at the highway entrance ramp. I can see the back of a ragged cardboard sign in his hands and am curious to know where he's heading, so I skirt behind a tractor trailer parked nearby, hoping to read the sign without being spotted. But as soon as I peek around the dusty fender, he looks right at me. Caught in the act, I saunter up to him, brush off my skirt, and explain that I wasn't trying to steal that truck; I was just playing hide-and-seek with my kids in this greasy truck stop. "Home free!" I sigh, kicking the wheel of the truck weakly. As he raises an eyebrow and smiles, I wonder why I just said that. I guess my profound sense of guilt causes me to explain each and every action. Instead of inventing silly excuses for my immature behavior, I should simply plaster my flyaway hair across my mouth.

"So, where are you headed?" I ask him, still feeling foolish.

He shows me the sign with the word "Destin" scrawled in thick black marker. I bite my tongue, refusing to admit that I am also going there. In my rule book of the road, I do not pick up hitchhikers. I'm about to wish him the best of luck when Sam calls my name and walks over, stuffing the last bite of a chocolate nougat cream doughnut in his mouth.

"Pauline, we're ready to leave!"

I turn to Sam, purse my lips and knit my brow in hope that he will understand "No way." But Sam is a failure at reading body language and at playing charades.

He turns to the hitchhiker and asks, "Hey buddy, where 'ya headin'?"

The hitchhiker shows him the sign. Sam breaks out in a wide smile,

points at the sign and says, "Hey, Pauline, look at that. He's going to Destin. And so are we!"

"Really!" I say, looking down at my feet. "What a coincidence."

"Buddy, you have to come with us," Sam offers. "We have one extra spot in our RV and it has your name on it. By the way, what is your name?"

"Jamie," the hitchhiker answers, brushing long greasy hair from his eyes. "And thanks for the ride."

Sam picks up Jamie's backpack and reaches for a white plastic container that sits by his feet, but Jamie lunges for it and stuffs it under his arm. Seven Shapiro faces are glued to the window of their RV, watching our every move. As we board with Jamie, the backpack and the box, our brood stops their synchronistic chewing, opening their eyes wide. Their stunned silence makes me think that bringing a complete stranger inside our "home" may have an advantage. Jamie sits down between Sarah and Daniel and slides the white box between his legs.

A lull. We pull onto the highway and in this hushed rapture, I actually have a complete thought. But it is fearful and it is overdue. I realize Sam has finally crossed over the barriers of normalcy and is endangering our lives. This Jamie guy could have escaped from prison, or worse, he could be from a psychiatric ward—and he is sitting right beside my Sarah, his dirty jeans brushing against my daughter's pink skirt. I am tense. I glance over at the box; it is long and could contain a sniper rifle. I gnaw at my highlighter. The walkie-talkie crackles and I pick it up.

"And then there were seven ..." Mike snickers. I wonder if he's referring to our new passenger or if he's talking in code, alerting me that I'm in a murder mystery. I am too exasperated to answer him and click off the walkie-talkie.

"So, Jamie," Sam begins, tapping the steering wheel, "What brings you to these parts? Gator watching?"

"Kind of," Jamie answers. "I'm studying zoology at the University of Florida in Gainesville. I've been doing research in the swamp lands."

"A live swamp stomper," Sam says, chuckling at his own joke. "Find anything interesting? Slimy?"

"Believe it or not, the swamp is beautiful in the spring. It's azalea season now," Jamie replies, rubbing his foot along the side of the box.

"I wanna go in the swamp," Daniel beams. "Can I, please?"

"You already spent time in a bog, Daniel. One swamp experience per trip is enough," I remind Daniel.

"I thought I saw a sign for Gainesville after we left Jacksonville. So why are you going to Destin?" I ask Jamie suspiciously, all the while looking at the box by his feet. Why is it that when I finally get rid of one box, and feel relieved, another mysterious package turns up and makes me feel completely panicked?

"Well, Easter's this Sunday and I wanted to take a break and hang out at the beach."

"You're not spending Easter with your family?" I ask, convinced that he is a dangerous convict.

"Nah. They live in New York and I don't have money to visit. Besides, I heard the beaches here are the best and I've never been."

"Beeeeeeacch," the kids chorus as we cross a bay and turn onto Highway 98. Behind a few sand dunes, we glimpse a huge stretch of sugary white sand beach, the turquoise ocean gently lapping the shore. Although I am now a tired, religious housebound mother of four, I used to be a connoisseur of beaches around the world. This beach, I deem, is officially first class. Yes, Jamie is right.

"Not bad," pipes in Dumpster over the walkie-talkie.

Mike is satisfied and relief washes over me once more. Soon a salmon-colored adobe wall with the gleaming words Destin RV Beach Resort looms ahead. We let Jamie off with his backpack and his box and say our goodbyes. I relax as I see Jamie walk away and extract the mangled highlighter from my mouth.

6:45 p.m. A red bricked road leads past huge, shimmering RVs. I feel as if I am in Oz and expect Munchkins to leap out from the trailers in song. We pull up to the office and are assigned our sites. The receptionist hands us a key for the beach, smiling as she tells us that we can enjoy our own private beach just a short walk across the road. "Across the road?" I am dumbfounded that the waves are not lapping against the sugary sand a few feet from my RV's front door.

"Private beach ... across busy road ... nine kids ..." I mumble. I have

a sinking feeling that my fellow RVers will hold me totally responsible for this mess-up.

“That’s right,” the receptionist answers with a sweet smile. “Just go out behind the pool, walk across the road and you’ll see the gate for the beach.” She speaks slowly and delicately, gesticulating every word with large sweeping motions of her arms. She talks to me as if I should be heading to the nearest asylum, not the beach. I have no argument. Yes, the resort is private; it’s the beach, set across a busy four-lane thoroughfare, that’s not.

Although I return to our site dejected, no one seems too upset by the fact that we can’t hear the waves crashing. Everyone is intent on setting up the site so we can start the Passover preparations. We hook up hoses and cables and set up barbecues and chairs.

We must get rid of all our *chametz* before Passover begins, so guess what’s on the menu? *Chametz!* The kids enjoy bowl upon bowl of macaroni and cheese while the adults bulk up on pasta with pesto sauce. As I’m washing the dishes, I hear a crunching sound on the floor and look around. I see nothing and go back to my soap suds.

8:15 p.m. The kids change and are eager to do the *bedikat chametz*, the last search for any bread products before the festival begins. Armed with a candle and a feather, the tradition is to look for errant *chametz* in the house. Given that Jewish women insist on uncovering every micro-crumb that could be lurking (often weeks before the holiday), there is usually slim pickings left for the *bedikat chametz* crew. I have, however, heard stories of people deciding to move their fridge during the *bedikat chametz* and, much to their shock, finding at least half a dozen Cheerios glaring contemptibly back at them.

Naomi, a diligent first grader, has brought her own feather all the way from her classroom in Talmud Torah to Florida. Long and bright blue, it arrived in absolutely perfect condition. As Naomi proudly shows it to us, Jake snatches it and puts it in his mouth. A big fight ensues and is not resolved until Julie, the ringside referee, extricates the bedraggled feather, sticking a cherry lollipop in Jake’s mouth. Sam, the ever-principled dentist, frowns but says nothing. Julie then returns the feather to its rightful owner. Naomi’s face falls and she bursts into tears; the feather is now so dull, it wouldn’t impress a balding, lame seagull.

To appease our enthusiastic bread seekers and our listless, featherless Naomi, we prepare little Ziploc bags filled with slices of bread and hide them. We light a candle, say the special blessing and then the kids scamper off in a jubilant game of Ziploc hide-and-seek.

This exercise is extremely limited in an RV; since one small candle lights up the entire place, they find the first three bags within five seconds, presenting them to us with glee. To make the game more challenging, Daniel blows out the candle and we are left in complete darkness. As my eyes slowly adjust, I hear a squeal and barely make out Tamar running towards me, a Ziploc bag raised in victory. She then trips, sending the bag flying across the floor. I reach out and it's gone. Daniel and Yoni find another bag, but Tamar's is still missing. I start to panic as I'm always afraid of unearthing a bread-filled Ziploc bag while serving my Seder meal; the sight of even a miniscule bread crumb on such a night could cause a guest or two to lose consciousness.

Flicking on the lights, we see Tamar sitting on the floor rubbing her eyes and muttering, "Gato bag." Daniel patiently explains to her that the correct word is Ziploc but she insists on saying gato or gator or gateaux. I leave her to her story and try to remember just how many bags I hid. Sam tells me I must have miscalculated and maybe Tamar didn't have a bag in her hands. It was dark and I may have imagined her finding one. I am so confused, I give in to his logic.

Sam recites the traditional prayer, asking that any *chametz* we own and have not seen be considered nullified. I sincerely hope it is nullified as I'm sure I hid one other bag of bread. If only Tamar could tell me what happened. Where could that bag be?

8:40 p.m. We all have an early night. Tomorrow we must still get down to the real work at hand: cleaning the dashboards for Pesach. The children chat excitedly until they drop off to sleep. Bloating by too much pasta, I toss and turn, and am sure I hear something outside my door. A bang and a crunch. I am too full to get up and decide that it is my indigestion and a bad case of nerves teaming up against me. I must get some sleep because tomorrow night will be like no other night: Pesach is in the air.

Cleaning the Dashboard for Pesach

Wednesday, April 16, 2003

6:10 a.m.

Brushed by the morning sun's gentle rays, I spring out of bed with such fierce energy, I hardly recognize myself. The children are fast asleep. Eager to get a head start before they wake up, I madly begin with the first task at hand: making our RV *chametz*-free. We must be rid of all our *chametz* by 11:00 a.m. today, burn the bounty from last night's Ziploc bag hunt, get food ready for the Seder tonight, organize meals for the next few days and go to the beach. Candle lighting is at 7:26 tonight.

Although I usually dread Pesach cleaning, I'm actually looking forward to it today; I've never cleaned an RV for Pesach and am excited by new challenges. Sam and I divide the job in two; he starts with the galley while I dive into the aft, otherwise known as the master bedroom. In my quest for crumbs, I strip the sheets and shake them outside, unfold all the

clothes, shake, check pockets and sweep. I find a few offenders: a chewed lollipop stem in my coat pocket and a chocolate chip cookie stashed inside Mr. Potato Head. I bet Tamar was hiding this from Eli. “Finder’s Keeper’s,” I trill, popping it into my mouth. Eating is such a great way to eradicate *chametz*. Mr. Potato Head accuses me, a white-gloved hand poking from his mouth. I pull out his arm and stick it in his ear; that will serve him right. I discover a wrapper from the chocolate bar I stashed in my skirt pocket in Bethpage, some 20,000 calories ago when I was five pounds lighter. I calculate that only five days have passed since that chocolate bar was imported to my hips and vow that I must eradicate sugar from my life, although I can’t decide when to begin. I also locate a faded Bazooka gum wrapper in one of Daniel’s coat pockets, while an already been chewed and “goobered” wad of bubblegum is craftily molded along his jacket lining.

As I sweep myself out of our very first *chametz*-free room, I collide into Sam. He has flung open every cupboard and emptied their contents. On a good day in this miniscule place, a dropped tea towel constitutes a mess. Now, mayonnaise, pickles, ketchup and BBQ sauce litter the floor. Cookies and crackers perch precariously on the counter. My face drops upon seeing such chaos and I scramble to bring back some order to this wretched scene. I can’t believe the children are sleeping through all of this mayhem. Guess they’re worn out from sitting in the RV for so many hours yesterday. I’m relieved to find the missing bag from last night’s *bedikat chametz* hunt and dangle it in front of Sam like a trophy moose head, “Ta da! See, Sam, I’m not crazy.”

“Sure, Pauline, but why’s it chewed up? It looks like it was ripped apart by sharp teeth. And where’s the bread that was inside?”

Why does Sam question everything? I just wish he’d say, “Good work, Pauline.” I return to my cleaning, stuffing all of the *chametz* items into plastic bags and throwing them outside. This frees up a good eight square inches. I grab a cloth and start furiously scrubbing the cupboards. When they are spotless and dry, I pull out my most prized Pesach item—shelf paper. This is so indispensable, I wonder how our ancestors managed without it.

Our kids, now fully awake and revitalized, quickly slip away from my frenzied scrubbing. Sensing my feverish pace, they are petrified I will

throw them a cloth and put them to work; or worse, toss them onto the garbage heap with the rest of the *chametz*. With a surgeon's precision, I empty the last box of Cheerios into their bowls and give them strict orders to stay out of the RV.

Wiping cereal dust off my hands just outside our door, I announce, "This RV's *chametz*-free! No trespassing until further notice or you'll be my slave." I unfurl my dusting cloth and the kids cower as if it's a whip.

10:20 a.m. As I'm busy twisting off the knobs from the stove top, there's a knock on my RV door. I'm intending to scour and boil these knobs but I just can't seem to extract them and actually wish I'd brought along those dreaded toothpicks. I turn to the door in frustration, pulling off one knob to my surprise.

Who could that be? The Shapiros and the Berkovitzes have instituted a no-knock policy that we're quite proud of, given that we're staunchly conservative Canadians. Back home, Canadian city folk often phone neighbors to ask for a cup of sugar. Often, not wanting to trouble anyone—and to avoid personal interactions at any cost—we prefer to button up a coat, pull on our boots and trudge through blowing snow to get sugar at the store.

There's another knock, this time more insistent. It could be Sam playing a trick on me. He's probably trying to distract me so he can plant a Krispy Kreme doughnut in our RV and then watch my blood pressure rise when I discover the unwanted *chametz*. I wouldn't put this past him, remembering when he went to Daniel's father-son Purim party dressed as Macbeth. The holiday of Purim is officially designated as a time to be joyful. We are actually commanded to eat, drink and be merry for this holiday, so Sam takes this particular halachah seriously. Sam gaily left for the party dressed in tights and a shimmering frock. The other fathers, however, came dressed as themselves, turning up in white shirts, black pants and black hats. Needless to say, Sam made quite an impression. But he was a brave Macbeth. Striding up to the principal, he said, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it." Then he tipped his cap, said "Purim *Sameach*" and strode out.

The real tragic hero of this scene was Daniel who, seeing his friends' sneering at Sam's dramatic entrance, ran out of the room in shame. To this

day, Daniel has banned Sam from all school activities. We soon learned that children of BTs simply want to blend in with the *frum* crowd. I too am guilty when my potatoes, sizzling in turmeric and cumin, infuse the neighbors' shnitzels and sweet kugels. Daniel and Sarah plead with me not to make *masala dhosa* or Senegalese coconut soup when their friends come over for Shabbat dinner. "Just stick to paprika tonight," Sarah reminds me, confiscating my curry.

Yet, Reb Schwadron's wise words from yesterday are still with me. His thoughts about personal enslavement and transformation inspire me to live life fuller and I even understand the method to Mike's and Sam's madness. Us curry-coddling BTs should be happy to bring parts of ourselves into the rich tapestry of Judaism; and if this requires adding an extra splash of color to some of the more staid traditions, it can only be enriching. Mike's and Sam's *Yiddishkeit* does brim with enthusiasm.

So, in the name of fun, I decide to respond to Sam's insistent knock on the door and shout out, "Beware. You are now entering a *chametz*-free zone."

I grab Eli's Star Wars light saber (a Walmart souvenir) and open the door a crack, "All invaders will be zapped," I shout in my most evil Darth Vader voice, brandishing the sword in the air.

"Mercy. Excuse me ... but ..." I hear from the other side of the door.

That ain't Sam. It's a woman's voice with a distinct Southern twang. Even Sam, our impressions meister, would be hard pressed to talk like that. I feel a pang and drop the saber in panic, tapping my neck to calm myself down.

"Ah, sorry, I thought you were someone else," I jabber through the door.

I open the door and am standing face-to-face with our next door neighbor, the pretty blond lady who sweeps her site in a slinky bikini. This morning, she is wearing an apron over her bikini. I straighten the *shmata* on my head, trying to look as dignified as possible. It's not so easy to switch roles from being Master of the Dark Side of the Force to a *frum* home-maker.

Our sweet neighbor simply stands speechless in my doorway, bright red toenails glowing in her pink chrysanthemum flip-flops, her large blue

eyes wide, pivoting in their sockets as she surveys diapers, jars of mayonnaise, underwear, cans of tuna and puzzle pieces covering the floor and seats, while every cupboard is flung open, gaping and empty.

“Um, would you like to come in?” I ask. “Excuse the mess. We’re just doing some cleaning around here.” I decide not to go into the whole holiday explanation thing. I know that we’re already considered to be the strangest neighbors she has ever had.

“Oh, no thanks. I just wanted to stop by and say hi. My name’s Susie and I’m from Atlanta. I couldn’t help but notice a box of matzah on your picnic table ... I know Passover’s coming up and I was just wondering if I could have a piece of matzah ...”

I look at her quizzically. Now it’s my turn to be speechless.

“Well, I’m Jewish,” she continues. “I usually eat matzah on Passover, but this year I totally forgot to bring some on our trip.”

“Sure,” I say. “Why don’t you take a whole box? In fact, I think we have something like thirty boxes. We have organic, spelt, whole wheat, *shmurah*, bran, oat. Take your pick.”

I lead Susie outside, happy to get her eyes off our mess, and take her to the picnic table, Matzah Central for the entire panhandle region. She chooses a box of plain matzah, then turns to leave.

“This box reminds me of the matzah I used to eat when I was a little girl,” she says, all smiles.

“Uh, Susie, I insist you take more. Passover is eight days long. You’ll need some Passover crackers, cereal, some matzah meal ... and I hope you’ll be joining us for the Seder tonight.” I fill a plastic shopping bag with some Passover essentials and hand it to her.

“No, really, we’ll be fine,” she says. “We used to have Seders when I was living at home, but ever since I got married, I stopped going.”

“Susie, I have to run back to my cleaning, but we’d be honored if you came.” And with those words, I run up the steps into my RV, leaving it very hard for her to say no.

“Just bring some lawn chairs and come well rested,” I shout out the window, “We’re going to be up late tonight.” I wave goodbye to her with the light saber, then shut the door, ready to face my own battle with the Dark Side.