



DOUG MCMAINS

## Readers Write

# THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

**MY SMALL TOWN FELT ISOLATED** from the world when I was growing up. Sometimes I'd camp out at the visitor's center by the highway and watch the travelers: leather-clad bikers on their way to a Harley rally, rumpled families piling out of minivans, elderly rv owners. They were all going someplace, and I envied their freedom.

As soon as I could start traveling, I did. I celebrated New Year's Eve in Paris. I slurped noodles at the fish market in Tokyo. I circled the pyramids at Giza on a camel. I slept among elephants and hippos in Tanzania. I floated past dead bodies wrapped like packages in the Ganges River. I climbed barefoot up a mountain to a Buddhist temple in Burma. I joined anti-government demonstrations in Buenos Aires. I ducked behind a policeman during a near-riot in Jerusalem. I wandered the medina in Marrakech. I hoisted a giant beer stein at Oktoberfest in Munich. I cried at the Killing Fields in Cambodia.

All of it was fascinating, but none of it made me feel any less lonely. Often I simply couldn't get over how cold I was or how badly I had to pee.

For the past three years I've lived in a place where I can watch deer graze and hear coyotes howl their eerie harmonies. I like this sense of isolation on our increasingly crowded planet: the unfurling of plum blossoms, the greening of hillsides, the scent of eucalyptus trees. I feel lucky to be nowhere.

*Erika Trafton  
El Cerrito, California*

**FOR OUR TENTH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY** my wife and I decided to learn to scuba dive. We got our training and certification in the Monterey Bay area of California, and we returned there frequently to dive off the beaches.

There was a small cove with a large kelp bed that we enjoyed exploring. We saw plenty of wildlife: sun stars, crabs, abalone, and the occasional bright orange Garibaldi or fierce-looking wolffish, all illuminated by the weak rays of sun streaming down through the forest of kelp.

One clear Saturday morning, as we pulled ourselves along the bottom, we were followed closely by a young spotted harbor seal. If either of us picked up

a starfish or turned over a rock, the seal was there in seconds, inspecting the disturbance for anything edible.

We wound our way between kelp stalks until we had used up half our air. Our routine at that point in the dive was to surface, get our bearings, and then head back in the direction of the beach. But that day, despite the clear weather when we'd arrived, we surfaced to find ourselves in thick fog: pure whiteout conditions.

The water was calm, and there was no sound except our own nervous whispers. We listened but couldn't hear the waves breaking on the shore. I usually wore a compass on my wrist but had left it behind. The fog was so thick that we couldn't even tell where the sun was. If we picked the wrong direction in which to swim, we could easily have headed farther out to sea.

At that moment the harbor seal who had been tailing us popped up from below. He *whuffed* to clear his nostrils and bobbed there with us, like a marine Labrador retriever. Then he sank below the surface and popped up again several feet away. We swam toward him. When

we got to within a few feet, the seal dived under again, surfacing another ten feet away. We followed. This went on for many minutes until, finally, he didn't resurface. We floated there, wondering what to do next. Then we both heard the low-pitched hum of a motorcycle cruising along the road at the top of the cliffs. We kicked wildly toward the sound and within a few minutes could make out the faint line of the shore.

*Carl W. Albritton  
Safety Harbor, Florida*

**MY FATHER HAD BEEN IN THE SOUTH** Vietnamese army, and after the North defeated the South, our family was branded “*nguy*,” which meant we were second-class citizens. My parents initially made two failed attempts to escape from communist Vietnam. Then, almost two years after the fall of Saigon, they decided to try again. “Freedom or death,” my father said.

We moved to a small village at the tip of the Saigon Delta and pretended to be fishermen. My eighteen-year-old brother learned to operate a boat and studied the tides and the comings and goings of the military-patrol vessel. Around the same time every Sunday, he discovered, the officers on the gunboat got drunk and ran the craft aground, where it remained stuck until the tide rose hours later.

One Sunday thirty-six people, including all of my immediate family and relatives, set out on the ocean to escape the oppressive conditions. There was throwing up, hunger, and fear — and lots of water, with no land in sight. Our second night on the open sea, a storm came up with waves so big they looked like two-story buildings. The boat sputtered toward the shore of Malaysia only to get stuck on a sandbar. The waves continued, and our little fishing boat began to fall apart from the relentless beating. We managed to help one another to the beach, where we stood and watched as the craft sank, taking all our possessions with it.

The Malaysian authorities detained us, then put our group and several hundred other refugees on a boat to Australia. But the dilapidated craft wouldn't make it to Australia. We floated for a hundred days with nowhere to dock, drifting around

Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Finally the United Nations struck a deal with the Malaysian government: we would live in Malaysia under UN care. We were taken to a remote jungle island off the coast, where we cut down trees to build homes. We lived there for about six months before the U.S. offered us refugee status.

My family arrived at Stapleton Airport in Denver, Colorado, without winter coats and not knowing a word of English. We managed to settle into our new lives, going to school day and night to learn our host country's language. The only TV programs we could understand were *The Electric Company* and cartoons.

Though I've found freedom and have achieved my dreams of getting a good education, a job, and a house, I sometimes feel as though I am still struggling to belong. I am neither welcome in Vietnam nor fully accepted here as an American. In some ways I am still on that boat.

*Tam-Anh Pham  
San Jose, California*

*(end of excerpt)*

**R**EADERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

We publish only nonfiction in Readers Write. Feel free to submit your work under “Name Withheld” if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary one-year subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. Please include your e-mail address and phone number. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
The Beach	October 1	April 2010
Sugar	November 1	May 2010
Taking Chances	December 1	June 2010
Pretending	January 1	July 2010
The Last Word	February 1	August 2010
Beauty	March 1	September 2010