

'My wonder at that first step moves me still, that stride into the unknown, that grasping for stars; the open road before me, the Blue Mosque at my back, the Beach Boys in my ear. Ahead stretched six thousand miles, six countries, three world religions spanning West and East along the world's wildest and oldest trail. I was leaving ordered Europe, crossing Turkey and chameleon Iran, reaching through reopened Afghanistan, falling into the ferment of India and lifting myself towards the pure, clean Himalayas, to Nepal and the trail's end.

All my life I have wandered. When I was a boy I rambled away from home after school, straying along unfamiliar streets, roaming off into parks and meadows to climb trees, build camps and talk to strangers. The world felt vast, diverse and safe. I was as free as a leaf in the wind, as long as I came back in time for supper. Day after day I discovered the wonder in my neighbourhood, in the streets and fields beyond, spiralling ever further away from the familiar.

My father too loved to roam. Night after night he came into my room and told me to get dressed. We climbed into the car and started out for Florida, California, even Mexico, with me aged eight or nine driving on his lap. He cranked up the radio and hurtled us on our way with I Get Around, Magic Carpet Ride, Gates of Eden. Together we sang along to Dylan, the Stones, ten dozen Golden Oldie stations along the endless dark Interstates. The next morning, when I awoke, we found ourselves blinking in the sharp daylight of Times' Square or the Eire shore hundreds of miles from home.

As I grew older the world changed. People became suspicious of unfamiliar streets and lonely parks. We no longer trusted in the kindness of strangers. We eyed our fellow man warily rather than looked out for him. We divided society into 'them' and 'us', our optimistic innocence lost as we exiled ourselves from Eden at home and abroad. Those dazzling, high-volume night flights with my father had left me both enchanted by and wary of spontaneity. But I hungered for the perfect destination that he and I had never reached. I still wandered along the trail of wonders, believing in a family of man, yearning to complete the greatest journey bopping to the best songs of all time.

...Those old journeys carried me forward to the Now, or Nearly Now, to the original independent travellers, the Beats, hippies and Intrepids, the kids who adopted the Asia Overland trail in the 1960s. They were the ones whose freedom I envied, whose spontaneity attracted and haunted me, whose bewitching optimism today seems as lost as my once safe world. I wanted to know why this route became the journey of their age. I needed to put my finger on the triggering events which shot them and so us all -- along the road. I had to understand how that decade affected the countries traversed, sweeping the region through extraordinary changes, casting such long shadows over our own fearful and protective era.

Then spring came, the great time of travelling, and I flew to Istanbul. I stood before the Blue Mosque and the Milion, the lone stone Roman pillar, worn and fragmented, from which all road distances were once measured. I took that first step. I didn't realise this Journey to the East would be my Pilgrim's Progress 'from this World to that which is to come'. I couldn't see that I was Goldmund cutting free of Narziss. Sal Paradise running down the razor edge of time. A Merry Prankster on the bus, tootling the multitudes, rolling up for the real Magical Mystery Tour. I simply trusted that my hidden somewhere lay on the road ahead; the perfect place somehow always known to us. All I had to do was reach out for it, to outrun life, to follow one great red line across Asia to the wild beating of my heart.

I looked up at the blue sky into which the swallows were rising and thought Here it Began. Here I begin.'

Rory MacLean

(Extract from 'Magic Bus: On the hippie trail from Istanbul to India' by Rory MacLean published by Penguin in the UK, Editions Hoëbeke in France.)
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