Our Trip to Coeur d'Alene

Staci & Andrew

August 1 – August 4, 2002

In August 2002 Staci and Andrew went on a little weekend trip to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. This was for a Simpson family gathering—it was a combination anniversary celebration for Ann and Ray, and 65th birthday celebration for Ann. All of Ann's four adult children were planning to attend, to honor and celebrate their mother and her husband Ray.

We had such a nice time we wrote a diary of the trip by way of thanks to Ann and Ray, and to preserve our vacation memories for future remembrance. We wrote this from memory after the fact, so it's not a full account–just a compilation of some of the events and moments that stayed bright in our minds in the days following.

The Participants

- **Ann Simpson**: Staci's Mom.
- **Ray Riches**: Ann's husband and partner for 15 years.
- **Brent Simpson**: Ann's eldest son, accompanied by his wife Kathy and their two sons Cory and Josh.
- **Staci Simpson**: Ann's daughter and second oldest, accompanied by her dear friend Andrew.
- **Marla Simpson**: Ann's daughter and third oldest
- **Garth Simpson**: Ann's youngest son. Unfortunately Garth's wife Jen could not attend.

Thursday August 1

We left Seattle around 11:30 am, then drove for a couple of hours before stopping for lunch at a little diner in Ritzville, in the desert-like eastern part of the state, well east of the Cascades.

The waitress in the diner was the archetypal small-town waitress: middle-aged, permed, and with the ravaged voice of a lifetime smoker. The menu was also the archetypal diner menu, virtually identical to every one like it in anywhere in the US. Very heavy on the protein, with enormous amounts of calories, and almost nothing even remotely healthy.

Staci decided she just wanted the vegetables and mashed potatoes that accompanied all the other gigantic-portion-of-meat entrees, and asked if she could just have that. The blankly uncomprehending waitress gazed at her for a long moment, then said, "Well honey, you could just have one of the children's meals," pointing to the appropriate place on the menu. Thinking it was the size of the meal that was at issue, when in fact it was the formulation.

But after some back-and-forth, Staci was able to convince her that she really did just want the vegetables, mashed potatoes, and a salad. Andrew said, "Sounds good to me—I'll have the same." So the mystified waitress went off to tell the cook she had two big city folk who wanted one of his magical culinary creations, but with its central, defining element removed. Perhaps he experienced a moment of professional outrage, but if so we heard nothing of it.

We were reminded of the somewhat similar scene in the movie Five Easy Pieces, where Jack Nicholson has difficulty ordering what he wants in a diner. We talked about that and other movies until our food arrived.

The bill came to just under $10. Up at the register Staci handed over a $20, and got back a $10 bill, plus a few pennies in change. With tip in mind, Staci then asked the waitress if she could break the $10 into smaller bills. There was a bit of a pause, during which Andrew observed, “Otherwise, you know, you’re gambling on getting either a $10 tip or nothing.” To which our waitress quickly rejoined, “Oh, I think I know the odds on that.”

Back out on the street it was extremely hot, but we did the quick obligatory tour of Ritzville. Staci wanted a key chain, so we looked for one in several second-hand stores in the very depressing downtown Ritzville. We didn’t find one, but Staci bought a green beaded necklace instead.

Then back in the car and a few more hours driving to Spokane. As we were leaving we had pulled Andrew’s duvet off his bed and thrown it in the back of the car along with a couple of pillows, and we took turns sleeping in the back during the long drive across eastern Washington. It was quite comfortable back there.

In Spokane we stopped to pick up some groceries for our stay, though our hosts would be providing most of the meals. But we needed to get some stuff for breakfasts, so we got lots of peaches and mangoes for Staci, since she likes to have fruit with soy milk for breakfast, and for Andrew we got baguette and rolls. And of course coffee. And we also got some smoked salmon, and hummus and rice crackers for snacks.

As we reached Coeur d’Alene the sun was setting. Andrew was asleep in the back, but Staci got to enjoy the spectacular sunset and magnificent views as the highway curved around and descended to Lake Coeur d’Alene.

We arrived to find Ray and Ann unpacking their VW bus and setting up the campsite. The camping area was set on an elevated area about 100 feet up from the lake, with a great view overlooking the lake.

Soon after arriving we had our first really memorable vacation moment: the four of us sat down for a kind of impromptu snack-style dinner. Staci and Andrew broke out the snacks they had brought, and we dined on baguette and smoked salmon, hummus and rice crackers, and Caesar salad (the latter convenience-style, in a bag with dressing supplied—i.e. a complete Caesar salad turnkey system). Accompanied by a few cold beers from the large and varied array of beverages that Ann and Ray had provided. We sat in comfortable folding camp chairs as we ate, and as the sun set we looked at the beautiful view out across the lake, to the Idaho mountains silhouetted against the darkening sky.

When Ray wanted more salmon to go with his baguette he said, “Fish me,” which we all found very amusing.

As the light faded bats came out and began to hunt; small dark shapes hurtling through the warm evening air. In the twilight they move too fast to track with the eye; you see them for an instant then they are gone.

When it got dark we moved down to the boat, and for a while lay on the deck looking up at the stars. We spotted a couple of satellites, moving across the night sky as a tiny pinprick of light, still illuminated by the setted sun. And also the lights of a few planes, flying very high. And once, a shooting star.

Then we went below and turned in for the night; the first time either of us had slept in a boat for as long as we could remember.

Friday August 2

When we awoke the next morning the first thing to do was make coffee, a tricky operation in the somewhat cramped quarters below deck. But morning coffee is the first and most essential operation of the day for both Staci and Andrew, and Staci applied herself to this with dexterity and determination, heating individual cups of water in the tiny on-board microwave, and pouring it through the precariously balanced drip filter coffee maker.

After 20 minutes or so of this careful diligence we were each rewarded with the results: a small steaming mug of this precious, aromatic beverage. For breakfast Andrew had baguette, cheese and fruit; Staci was fasting today and so didn’t eat breakfast.

Later that morning the four of us went out sailing on the boat, which was quite marvellous. The weather was warm and sunny, with a perfect gentle breeze for easy sailing, but strong enough to tilt the boat over excitingly (or alarmingly, depending on your perspective) on a reach. (A reach: sailing with the wind directly abeam. Abeam: at right angles to the length of the boat. A couple of the trove of sailing terms we learned that day.)

Andrew loved the mature technology of sailing; everywhere you look on the boat there are devices: pulleys, winches, cleats, and all of them with a pure practicality of purpose, backed by thoughtful and intelligent design. And since everything has to withstand wind and water, there is little room for shoddy construction. So everywhere you look there is the unmistakable aesthetic integrity of form-follows-function design. The sailing was great; definitely a vacation highlight.

Around noon or so we all clambered into Ray's VW bus and drove to Lookout Pass, on I-90 at the border between Idaho and Montana. We had intended to rent mountain bikes and bike the nearby Hiawatha Mountain Bike Trail. There is a bike rental shop just off the highway at Lookout Pass, but when we got there we ran into a problem. We thought there was a shuttle service to transport rental bikes from the shop to the top of the trail, but it turned out that there isn't—there is a shuttle service from the bottom of the trail back up to the top, but not from the shop to the trail—you have to arrange your own bike transportation to the trailhead. And unfortunately, there just wasn't room in the VW bus for four mountain bikes plus the four of us, though we examined this option closely.

So we were out of luck for mountain biking. So we decided we would drive to the trail anyway, and just hike part of it. The drive to the trail was along a narrow mountain road with beautiful scenery, and over another mountain pass—Roland Pass. While Andrew enjoyed the scenery, Staci read *Enduring Love*, by Ian McEwan. As we were setting off from Seattle she had asked Andrew for a book recommendation for the trip, and he had handed her that one, his most recent book group selection, and a very entertaining read. So all weekend, whenever nothing more interesting was going on, Staci had her nose buried in the book.

Ray dropped Ann, Staci and Andrew off at one of the road access points along the trail, and arranged to meet us a couple of hours later at another road access point a few miles further down the trail. So then the three of us spent the next couple of hours walking the beautiful trail, and enjoying the spectacular mountain views.

When we got to the take-out point Ray was dutifully there to meet us, and then we drove back home.

Back at the campsite Ann made a delicious Pad Thai dinner, which we enjoyed sitting at the campsite looking out at the view across the lake.

After dinner we set up our tent—for the rest of the weekend Marla and Garth would be sleeping on the boat, and we would be sleeping at the campsite. Ann and Ray provided us with a tent, sleeping pads and sleeping bags, so we got all that set up, and supplemented it with Andrew's duvet and pillows from the back of the car.

Then we finished up the day playing cards on the boat. We played Five Crowns, a traditional Simpson family favourite, and great fun. Ann won the game, then Ray went to bed, then the three of us stayed up late playing a new card game called Exactica. This is a sort of logic-oriented card game by the same company that makes Set, but none of us was really able to formulate a meaningful strategy.

As we were walking back up the short steep road to the campsite, we found ourselves illuminated in the headlight beams of a car coming down the hill. It was Marla, just arrived from Seattle. So she got out and we greeted her, the three of us standing in the chill night air under the stars, hugging ourselves against the cold, the way people do. Then she went on down to the boat, and we climbed into our tent to sleep.

It was very cozy and comfortable in our tent with our pillows and Andrew's duvet spread out over us. Even though we were tired from our long vacation day Staci couldn't sleep, and she demanded that Andrew tell her a story. In fact she demanded that he tell her the rest of the story of *Enduring Love*, even though she was only half way through. So that's how we finished the day, lying in our sleeping bags in a tent, as Andrew narrated the story.

Saturday August 3

We awoke in the morning to find that Brent and his family had arrived during the night, so now everyone was here except Garth, who would be arriving late that evening. Staci again did her coffee-making alchemy, magically producing cups of coffee for everyone, and we had peaches and soy milk for breakfast.

Even though we had not been able to do the bike trip the previous day, Andrew wanted to do it today—he really liked the idea of biking along an old railway track. But everyone who had said they might go eventually bailed out—Ray wanted to take his new guests out sailing, and Marla, having just driven six hours from Seattle the night before, didn't want to do any more driving that day. Brent was up for it, but neither of his two boys was especially interested.

Staci didn't really want to do any more driving either, but decided she would go anyway, because that's what Andrew wanted to do. By the time we were ready to head out it was late morning and we were already a bit late, because we were under strict instructions to be back at the campsite in time for a 6:30 pm departure that evening to see West Side Story in Coeur d'Alene.

But as we were walking to our car Andrew realized that he wasn't absolutely sure how to get to the bike rental shop at Lookout Pass. Just at that moment the yacht club manager walked by, a friendly but uncomplicated guy called Bill. So Andrew asked him, "Do you know how to get to Lookout Pass?"

What's the worst thing that can happen when you're in a hurry, and you ask someone for directions? Right away Bill did that thing that people do, that makes it immediately clear that they can't help you, but they're going to waste your time anyway. So Bill started in with the classic "Lookout Pass? Um, let's see now..." But we just didn't have time for this, so Andrew cut him off immediately by saying "Sounds like a 'No' to me." And off we went.

It was about an hour's drive to get to Lookout Pass, and on the way Andrew drove and Staci continued reading her book. Although Marla and Brent didn't come on the bike trip, they had both brought their mountain bikes with them, so we borrowed their bikes so as not to have to rent them. We also borrowed Marla's car since it had a bike rack already attached.

But we still had to drop by the rental shop to get our trail passes, and also to rent bicycle helmets and clip-on lights for the bicycles, because where we were going it would be very dark. The guy in the rental shop was one of those guys who is in complete harmony with his work. He was a sort of stocky, goofy-looking guy, but very friendly and helpful, and completely unpretentious. He was happy to check out our non-rental bikes for us, and adjust the seats and handlebars. He seemed to inhabit the world of mountain bikes as if it were his most natural element. In the same way that some guys clearly, unequivocally belong in, say, a record shop, this guy belonged in a mountain bike shop.

So then we drove off to the trail head, about 7 miles away. We parked, put on our helmets, clipped the lights onto the bikes, and set off down the trail. The Hiawatha Mountain Bike Trail is a scenic section of abandoned railway line that has been converted into a mountain biking trail, following the historic Milwaukee Road railroad as it winds through the rugged Bitterroot Mountains near the Idaho-Montana border. The tracks have all been taken up so there is a wide and relatively level trail—plus, it's downhill all the way! At least it is in one direction, and for uncommitted riders like ourselves who don't want to bike back in the uphill direction, there is a shuttle bus service to take bikes and riders from the bottom back up to the top.

The section of trail we biked is 15 miles long, winding its way through 10 cavernous tunnels, and over 7 vertiginous trestles. And through beautiful mountain scenery all the way.

The first thing we encountered on leaving the trail head is the very long Taft Tunnel, almost 2 miles long under the Idaho/Montana state line—in fact under Roland Pass, the same pass we had driven over yesterday. Once you have gone a couple of hundred yards into the tunnel it is completely dark—there is just the meagre pool of light cast by your own bicycle light. And it's cold too, because it's deep in the mountain and gets no sunlight. But it isn't quiet—you can hear the sound of water running down the walls, and the weirdly distorted echoes of the voices of other bikers, far ahead or behind.

By the time we got to the other end we were quite chilled from the cold and damp, but then we came out into the sudden bright sunshine and warm air.

After a few miles we stopped at a shady place with a nice view to have a little lunch snack. We sat in the dappled shade and ate hummus, crackers, fruit and rice cakes. As we ate and looked at the peaceful view, Andrew said, "It's kind of idyllic." Staci said, "Yes it is."

There are informational displays every half mile or so along the trail, so you can stop and read pictorial factoids about the colourful history of the railroad: its construction, its trains, the men who built it, and all the rest of it.

At the bottom of the trail we encountered the trail patrol guy—the guy whose job it is to bike up and down the trail, check & issue trail passes, repair flat tires, adjust seats and handlebars, and make sure no one is misbehaving. Now here was another guy in great harmony with his work—he was clearly one of those fortunate people who absolutely love their job. He was the archetypal hippie/mountain biker: long-haired, fully decked out in mountain biking paraphernalia, and wearing a T-shirt with "Hiawatha Trail Patrol" on the back.

We chatted with him for a moment or two, then Andrew said, "So, did you arrest anyone today?" A shadow flickered across his face for an instant as he parsed this out; this could easily be mocking. But our friendliness and good humour were plain to see, and we stood and talked with him for a while.

Then we loaded our bikes into the shuttle bus for the ride back to the top of the trail. The bus was completely packed with bikes and riders. The ride back, like the trail itself, was very scenic, and the driver stopped for photo ops at the especially spectacular viewpoints. Whenever he did so all the other passengers would crowd over to one side of the bus (like in the movie Speed when they take that very sharp turn), and there would be a mass clicking of shutters.

At one point the bus driver said, "There is a moose around the next bend." And sure enough when we drove around the next bend in the road, there was a moose browsing in the middle of the river in the valley down below. So was the moose always there? Or was it a mechanical moose? It was quite mystifying.

So then we headed back to the rental shop, dropped off our rented gear with the friendly rental guy, and drove back to the camp. Andrew drove again, while Staci finished her book.

When we got back to camp it was just after 6 pm, and we were due to leave for Coeur d'Alene at 6:30 sharp. So suddenly we were in a big rush, having just under 30 minutes to shower, change, and have dinner before leaving.

Ann had made a stir-fry for dinner, and everyone else had either eaten dinner already, or was still eating. Andrew helped himself to a plate of delicious stir-fry, wolfed it down, then rushed off to shower and shave. Staci did things in the reverse order, preferring to shower and change first, then have dinner.

But at the appointed time we were all ready to go. We had all brought something decent or semi-decent to wear for this event, and so we made quite a handsome party, freshly showered in shirts and blouses and dresses, heading off for a night at the theatre. We actually looked like, you know, normal people.

So then we piled into two cars for the drive to Summer Theater in Coeur d'Alene. Andrew and Staci rode with Ann and Marla in Staci's car. Andrew, driving, had one explosive moment of road rage, directed towards a slow-moving Coeur d'Alene driver, then immediately apologized to his three passengers for this unseemly outburst.

West Side Story was... OK, and certainly exceeded our expectations for a provincial musical production. The leading male (Tony) was a great singer, and somewhat dominated the show. Maria was a bit on the shrill side, and besides, was faced with the near-insurmountable handicap of comparison with Natalie Wood, with whom this role is so completely identified. As completely as, say, James Bond is identified with Sean Connery. On the other hand, nobody is identified with the role of Tony. Who even remembers the name of the actor?

On the way back we stopped at a supermarket to get cake for Ann's birthday the next day. By now it was late in the evening, and we experienced another surreal American phenomenon: the 24-hour supermarket late at night: a vast, high-ceilinged hall, brightly lit, and almost completely deserted. Silently warehousing an unbelievable cornucopia of consumable wealth: row upon endless row, miraculously summoned from the four corners of the earth to this echoing cathedral in northern Idaho.

No difficulty at all in finding a cake; the only difficulty to choose one out of many. And no difficulty to find roses either, for of course there are fresh flowers here too. We bought a dozen beautiful red roses for Ann's birthday, and spirited them out to the trunk of the car without her knowing.

Back outside Staci rode one of those mechanical horses for children, that rock back and forth for a minute or so for a quarter, and this caused her great entertainment. It was all very silly. How to explain this silliness? It is not just that

Staci is in touch with her own inner child; it goes far beyond this. She is in fact *her own inner child—there is no external adult*. It is only by understanding this, that we can fully understand her behaviour.

Late that night Garth showed up to complete the party, so now all four of Ann's children were present to celebrate her anniversary and birthday. We finished the day crammed in the boat talking and drinking beer, but we were making a bit too much noise, and there was a complaint from a neighbouring boat, so at that point we called it a night and went to bed.

Sunday August 4

The next morning Ann made a scrambled egg breakfast for everyone, and Staci, now an expert, made her precious microwave coffee.

Then Staci went off for a solitary hike through the woods, while Andrew stayed at the camp and made ice cream with Ann, Garth and Marla. This was a major project, fully requiring the cooperation of four people. Ann had acquired a couple of old-fashioned mechanical ice cream makers at garage sales, and had brought along all the other ingredients: fresh cream and sugar, flavorings, and the rock salt for freezing. There was a freezer at the campsite filled with block ice, and Andrew set about the task of breaking the large blocks into pieces small enough to fit into the ice cream makers, using an ice pick.

Ann and Garth mixed the first batch of ingredients, then Marla began turning the crank for that batch. Then Ann and Garth mixed the second batch, and Garth began cranking that one. Then since the cranking is tiring, especially as the ice cream begins to thicken, we took turns to crank, break ice, and add salt. We made two large batches, one with malt flavoring, and the other with fresh peaches. Then we set them aside until lunchtime.

Then Garth entertained Brent, Marla, Staci and Andrew by setting up his laptop computer and showing us part of his PowerPoint presentation for his current research project. He is a professor of chemistry at Purdue University, and his research is about how cells and other microscopic objects respond to time-varying electric fields of varying frequencies. None of us understood all of it, but it was very interesting nonetheless.

For lunch we had barbecued tofu, with birthday cake and home-made ice cream for dessert. During dessert we sang Happy Birthday to Ann, and presented her with the roses.

Though there was another whole day of activities planned for the rest of Sunday, unfortunately we had to leave soon after lunch, since Staci had landed a new video production contract, and had to be back in Seattle to start work first thing Monday morning. So we loaded up the car, said our good-byes, and headed off back to Seattle.

We stopped in Coeur d'Alene to pick up some snacks for the drive, then in the late afternoon we stopped for a break at a highway rest area. And this was the final memorable moment of our trip, eating our snack at a picnic table in the grassy rest area, enjoying the afternoon sunshine as the Interstate traffic hurtled by in the distance.

Thank you Ann and Ray for a lovely vacation weekend in Idaho.