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## Munro: Off the Road

### OFF THE ROAD

Jennifer D. Munro

I spent many childhood weekends crammed into a midget-sized coffin with a peek-a-boo dome. No starched Snow White stretched on her roomy bower dreaming of a hero's minty kiss, but a soggy toddler stuffed into the luggage compartment of a subcompact 1967 Volkswagen Bug, wishing for a new family. Forget the prince, gimme a station wagon like the ever-expanding Catholic family next door. Getting up early on Sunday mornings, like they did for this puzzling thing called church, would be worth a little legroom.

My parents stowed me, their youngest child, in the cubbyhole as we bounced and jolted along unpaved roads in Hawaii. The 'cubbyhole' was our term for the yard-long space behind the rear seat, designed for suitcase storage and just wide enough for a paper grocery sack sitting sideways. I slouched under the slanted back window, banging my head when we hit potholes. I bent my knees to fit in the cramped nook when lying down. Whatever went into the back of the Bug entered through the two front doors; there was no hatchback access, just a pizza-sized lid over the rear engine, and no rear doors. Only the front windows opened. First one in, last one out, I baked in my airless pocket. The dimpled white vinyl stuck to my bare, sunburned skin, and the pockmarks left me looking like I suffered from a skin disease.

We explored Oahu every weekend. Dad would leave the Bug nosed into the kiawe bushes at the side of a dirt road while we hacked our way to an unimproved beach. The car sizzled for hours under the beating sun. Afterwards, I sweltered in the turtle-shaped terrarium while Mom reloaded the backseat with extraneous items such as my two brothers, the Barefoot Boloheads. The wet dog perched between them, panting moist air into the bathtub-sized space. Then the Bug would roar to life, sounding like an underwater cricket wired to arena amplifiers. Loaded like a camel on its knees, it inched forward before gaining

momentum and sputtering into second gear. Salt-laden air crept back to my oven, and I could breathe again well enough to start wailing.

My bathing suit crotch often bulged with wet sand that I'd forgotten to empty out back at places like Ewa Beach. I cried as the sand dried and crept into tender body openings that I didn't know the names for. Dad refused to stop the car, anxious after a day of blissful family togetherness to get home to his Primo beer. Mom, just as eager for her rum and Tab, refused to pipe up in my defense. After all, if I was to be extricated from the cubbyhole, everything in front of me would have to be unloaded first: the Barefoot Boloheads and the piles of damp and sandy beach gear my mother had strategically placed between them to keep them from fighting, including the dog, towels, mats, chairs, toys, and squeaking Styrofoam ice chests. Everything except the surfboards, which were strapped to the roof.

Dad kept driving. "For cripes sake, you should've rinsed it out before we left! Stop your bellyaching!"

"Chicken on your lip!" the Barefoot Boloheads mimicked my parents' inexplicable ridicule of my pout, a term that puzzles me to this day.

"Bolohead, bolohead, bolohead!" I pointed at the buzz cuts that Mom had shaved into their dumb skulls while they squirmed on the yellow kitchen stool in the front yard. Sun-bleached hair rained to the ground with the blossoms from the Golden Shower tree, Mom threatening with her electric razor, "Move one more time and you lose an ear! I mean it!" And she did.

Dad shouted at the rearview mirror, "One more word out of either of you and I'm gonna smack you to Christmas!" To me, "Any more whining and you'll be back there 'til they build a bridge to California!" I believed they were building one, but had no idea how far they'd gotten.

From behind him, we couldn't tell if the lines around his eyes were from smiling or scowling, but we banked on the latter. So I shut up and suffered while the Barefoot Boloheads stuck their tongues back at me and poked each other in stealth and silence

over the damp mound between them. Dad navigated the Zenith Blue Bug around the unpaved road's craters not much smaller than the car itself. We drove on without speaking, the utopian sixties family in paradise, wedged into the equivalent of half a twin-sized bed.

The beaches we traveled to were not the smooth, sculpted Hawaiian beaches of Waikiki postcards, where women doggie-paddled without ruining their hair or makeup, but local surfing beaches at the end of dirt roads, with rough seas crashing on rocks and a smattering of sand. The Barefoot Boloheads paddled farther out to surf, while I got pummeled and scratched on shore. The beating waves drove buckets of sand into my suit.

While I entertained myself trying to stay alive, my mother sat on a straw mat, her high hair bun a black speck as she sat far back under a scraggly tree. The sun reflecting off her cats-eye glasses flashed me reassuring signals that she hadn't run away, as she often threatened. She glanced up from her mystery novel every few hours to count heads. If she couldn't locate one of us, she figured we'd turn up sooner or later, and returned to her book. The oldest Barefoot Bolohead was once sucked out to sea by a riptide, rescued by fishermen as he went under, and some time later staggered a mile back up the beach to find us; to this day she still blames the second Barefoot Bolohead and me for not pointing out his disappearance (as if we would do something so silly when it looked like we'd gotten rid of him for good).

Meanwhile, Poncho the dog (named after his bed of yarn ponchos that my grandmother furiously knit but no one needed) busied himself digging holes big enough to bury all three kids, and I'm sure my mother considered this option.

And my father? I couldn't tell you where my father was while the Barefoot Boloheads and I fought to keep from drowning while my mother drowned herself in polite British problem-solving. Dad simply was not there. My mother was probably taking notes on how to bump off grumpy husbands without getting caught. *Husband?* she would say to Agatha Christie over tea and crumpets. *What husband?*

The coolers weighed less on the long hike back to the car. The supposed reason for the coolers was our lunch. There were no McDonalds back then, except the one in Waikiki (the closest we got to churchy reverence were the rare occasions when we passed beneath its arches), so you brought your snacks or went hungry. But bologna sandwiches weighed only so much, and Mom wound up with lots of empty Primo cans to stitch together with colored yarn for hats and Christmas decorations.

Bought brand new when I was barely walking, the Bug came with my name inscribed on the cubbyhole, since I was the youngest and therefore the smallest (this changed during puberty, when the Barefoot Boloheads got hooked on speed while I became addicted to Big Macs when McDonalds spread across the island). And yet I was happy, stuffed into my own private cocoon. I watched the Hawaiian sky and trees flick by through the small, oval, rear window, sitting up when Mom called out that we were approaching our favorite stretch of winding road lined with ironwood trees. We shouted *Zig! Zag! Zig! Zag!*, perhaps the only thing we ever did in unison.

To keep us occupied, Mom taught us games. We stared out the windows, obsessed with spotting white horses, which hardly littered a volcanic island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Whoever saw one first shouted *White Horse!* and earned the right to punch our siblings. We also searched for license plates from other states. If our attention wandered, given the lack of success, and we started to pinch each other, Mom shouted, "There's one! Missouri!"

"Where, where, where?"

"Too late. Already passed." Mom also spotted unicorns wandering through the cane fields.

Other than these ungratifying games that encouraged low expectations, my family was as happy to forget I was back there as I was to forget them. My mobile hideaway rode directly over the stuttering rear engine, so it wasn't hard to tune the family out, except when Dad yelled and shook his middle finger out the window. I'd pick my nose and scabs and sunburn flakes. My

## Munro: Off the Road

parents couldn't see to smack me and guarantee (with some glee) that I was scarring myself for life.

Dad sometimes took the kids to surfing movies like *Endless Summer* in Haleiwa, and Mom took us to the Waipahu Drive-In, stuffing as many pajama-clad kids into the Bug as she could for the one-car price, but they never went together. For reasons that remain unclear, in the middle of one of their frequent arguments, my parents saw their first movie together in ten years. In 1979, Christopher Reeve as Superman saved the planet, but he couldn't save the car that defined my childhood. My parents walked out of the movie, still not speaking to each other, to find their parking space empty. The police assured them that the Bug was stripped before the end-credits rolled, broken down to a pile of parts and the humiliated skeleton of its tiny chassis. My parents didn't see a movie together for another ten years.

The thought of the Bug's demise is akin to the loss of a favorite pet being put down by mistake at the local pound. It strikes me as odd that we never named it. Not that we were unsentimental, but we were trying to smile through the discomfort of chafing sand. We were too busy tuning out to put a name on what held us together. Drives in the Bug were the only time we spent as a family, packed together like feuding parishioners in a church pew. We never sat down to dinner together, since my Dad's HAM radio equipment littered the dining table. We ate scattered throughout the house with our plates perched on our knees, the portable television blaring *Mannix* while Dad practiced his Morse code, communicating in a language none of us could comprehend.

The Bug was our shimmying temple.

We went into trances under its hallowed dome, each staring out our separate windows. I swooned in my cubbyhole like a southern lady fainting in a sweltering evangelical tent. Miracles transpired beneath its protective palm, like the day my mother squeezed herself, eleven cub scouts, the dog, a full load of groceries, and me under its cupola. Mom shape-shifted in its front seat. If provoked, she contorted, and her arm snaked to an impossible length to

reach back and swat us. Mom also found her liberty in the Bug. At age 27, she learned to drive in it, operating the stubborn stick shift on a steep mountain road while three kids squabbled in the back seat and Dad lost his patience. After earning her license and the ability to go where she wanted, when she wanted, she swore she'd never drive Dad anywhere again. She kept her word for thirty years, until the night his appendix nearly burst, and even then I'm sure she gave it second thoughts.

And in the Bug, we believed in the vision of ourselves as a family.

My father still speaks in reverent tones when I mention the Bug. When I telephone from Seattle, Mom calls him inside; he's out in the yard throwing bricks at the neighbor's yapping poodles. Dad swiftly forgets the ankle-biters and reminisces about the Bug. "Best car I ever had. Boy, we took that thing everywhere, off-road and up trails. The rear engine gave it lots of traction. We put 120,000 miles on it. Still had the original clutch. Our first new car, straight from the factory line. Twenty-one hundred dollars, including options and tax."

"What were the options?"

"AM Radio."

Dad recently visited me in Seattle, and I drove him to dinner in my new Laser Blue Millennium Beetle. "For cripes sake, what the hell is that noise?" Dad frowned in the passenger seat, familiar lines around his eyes crinkling. He's had a few skin cancer scares, so the wrinkles worry me more now than when they signaled he was about to use the flyswatter reserved for our okoles.

"What noise?"

"Holy Christmas, that noise. Your goddamn back tire."

Volkswagen, literally "People's Car," was commissioned and named by Hitler. I glanced over at my scowling father and saw the resemblance. I hadn't noticed the noise that turned out to be a serious problem, but I had noted with sadness that the new Beetles have no cubbyholes. A large hatchback door opens onto a spacious trunk (into which I can't fit as many grocery bags as my mother could strategize into the old cubbyhole).

No more cubbies. Superman's dead. Ewa Beach is now a fancy park at the end of a paved road, with lots of showers for rinsing out sand. The Hawaii of my childhood is gone—the ironwoods are dying (eaten by termites or hit by cars that ziggged instead of zagged), Primo beer went belly up, and the sugarcane and pineapple fields we drove through are now subdivisions. The theatre multiplex became a row of military recruitment offices. The Bug is gone.

When I next telephone, Mom calls Dad in from where he's handing dog turds to the neighbor who drove my stranded parents home from the theater all those years ago. "His fucking dog craps in my yard," Dad says, as if this is a reasonable explanation. Then he chokes up as he tells me that he's reading Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and that he's mailing me a copy. When I was little, Dad never had time to read. He worked the night shift at a Pearl Harbor machine shop, both he and my mother returning to school while working and raising three unplanned kids who came in three years. He calls me regularly now when he finishes James Joyce ("boy, those Irish could write") or Raymond Carver ("geez, that guy could drink") or John Updike ("Christ, the semicolons!"). When I mention that I tried Jack Kerouac but just didn't get him, Dad tells me he read *On the Road* so often as a young man that his copy fell apart. Then he tells me a story I'd never heard. A Jersey boy and unaware of Kerouac, he'd hitchhiked up and down the east coast in his late teens, then flunked out of college his freshman year. He joined the army, since joining up for two years was better than being drafted for four. The army shipped him off to Honolulu, where he played trombone, which he had taught himself, full-time in the 27th Infantry Drum and Bugle Corps. He planned to head for Australia after being discharged to make his fortune in a jazz trio, but the trumpet player nixed their plans with a shotgun wedding. Dad was flipping burgers at the *Wiki Wiki Drive-In* in Waikiki, reading Kerouac's just-published jazz poetry, when he met my 17-year-old mother, a Hawaii native.

*Wiki Wiki* means *Quick Quick*, but his life stalled while my mother's soon "quickenened." A man whose bible was *On the*



*Road* ended up trapped on an island. I've never heard him play the brass instruments he'd once built his dreams upon. They remained in their cases, gathering dust, though once in a great while (I suspect Schlitz Malt Liquor was involved) he'd pull out a Dave Brubeck record album, turn the old phonograph player (with the penny taped to the stylus arm) to top volume, and fall silent, except for his tapping foot, while figuring out the time signature. Then he'd shout, "Listen! 7/4 time!" None of us cared, except that he was drowning out *The Brady Bunch*.

"Can you believe we once went ten years without leaving this rock?" he asks me now. "I don't know how we did it." Maybe they were waiting for that bridge.

After he retired, Dad bought 19 acres of second-growth forest in a rural area of Washington State near me. He flew up regularly just to hack a maze of roads into the dense brush. Driving on them reminded him of his boyhood when he used to "go crashing through the woods," he said.

My parents still rattle around Oahu in a series of little pickups my Dad dislikes but uses to haul antennas and HAM radio equipment. They look for excuses to take rides; Dad drove Mom to the dump on the other side of the island for their 45th anniversary. They drive to man-made beaches like Ko'olina to exercise, and Dad hangs his swimsuit on the side-view mirror to dry on the way home, waving like a colorful freedom flag. For twenty-five bucks, he bought a rusted tractor that sits in an old Kahuku cane field, and they often drive out there to check on the scrapheap that isn't going anywhere. Then he takes Mom to the new Starbucks for a Frappucino.

The old myth is that a Bug won't sink—ours kept my family afloat. Though I at times suffocated in the sarcophagan heat of my cubby, our weekend excursions were my father's only inroads back to his reckless and carefree youth. My parents bought it because of its price, the cheapest car on the market. As kids, we never knew we were making do. My mother was the only working mom on the block. We didn't recognize another one of her games for what it was, involving the calculator she carried

through the grocery store, punching in each item as she placed it in the cart; we shrieked over whose behavior had been best when Mom plucked something from the cart and assigned the winner the honor of returning it to its proper shelf.

Turns out the lunch coolers weren't because of no fast food chains or Dad's beer, but because we couldn't afford to eat out. Mom cut our hair because she couldn't pay a barber. The yellow kitchen stool, and many other household items, had been acquired with S&H Green Stamps. Our weekend drives were free entertainment that ultimately enriched my childhood more than ballet classes or fancy clothes. The world was ours to explore with Dad at the helm. 120,000 miles. That's a lot of mileage for a small island. Our road trips were an adventure. The family never shared the same physical space again after the Bug's loss. As teenagers, the Barefoot Boloheads surfed by themselves during school hours when they could smoke *pakalolo*. They grew their hair down their backs, styles they kept into middle age. My brothers and I left the island. We couldn't afford to live in Hawaii, where the cost of living is so high. We scattered, like the Bug's dismantled pieces. But once upon a time, it gave us traction during rocky times to move forward as a family.

And eventually, when a young bolohead enlisted man drove up to me in his 1968 Lotus White ragtop Beetle, you betcha I married him. Rust had eaten through the floor, so I had to lift my feet as we drove all over the island every weekend, but that car wooed me like no limousine could.