

Christina Moore

Going to College

My mom said she was driving because she gets car-sick otherwise, but I didn't buy it. Last month I got motion sick watching handcam footage she took from the back of a bus scaling the Andes. The footage showed me that a stocky, near-sighted, middle-aged woman from the Midwest, along with the ancient school bus carrying her, was not intended to climb the Peruvian landscape. But Mary Stingler is oblivious to notions of where she does and doesn't belong.

Ever since Dad passed, she has locked onto an adventure until its completion. Her adventure destinations have seemed as deliberate as stopping a spinning globe with her finger. After Thanksgiving dinner a few years ago, while dabbing a gravy stain on her quilted vest, she told me she would have to postpone Christmas plans because she would be spending three weeks in Costa Rica. I told her perhaps we could worry about that once she is on the plane. She narrowed her eyes at me and insisted that she was going.

"Sure," I said. "You have never traveled outside of the country, not even to the scenic side of Niagara Falls because, I quote, 'Why bother with customs? I'll go when I'm not inspected and prodded like cattle!'" If she actually made it to Costa Rica that year, I insisted, I would make Christmas dinner from scratch for the next 10 years.

On Christmas that year, she posted a photo to Facebook of her on a coffee bean plantation in Panama. She and two locals were holding a sign: "Merry Christmas! ¡Feliz Navidad!" She sent me a private message: *Merry Christmas! I ended up in Panama instead of*

Costa Rica, so it looks like I lost the bet! On my way to Costa Rica, a lovely Panamanian woman invited me to help with her village's community-owned coffee export operation. How neat! They asked me to stay a bit longer, but I will be home for your birthday! Lucky Charm pancakes as usual! XOXO - Mom. How many years does it take a mother to learn the art of saying-not-saying "I told you so"?

"Mom, please don't try to hold your breath over this whole bridge!" I said. Her silence told me she was going for it anyway. Once we were no longer over water, she said, "It's not that long of a bridge." A moment later, she pointed to a sign: 3 miles to Parrington University. We looked at each other and smiled.

"Looks like we're going in the right direction. Much to your surprise, I'm sure," she said. Not really, considering that the voice navigation had been talking to us the whole time. Six months ago I finally got her to stop printing out MapQuest directions and use her phone. She compromised by always using voice navigation, even when we were on well-worn routes to our house.

Ms. Voice Navigation was a bit confused once we got on campus. Mom parked at the first open spot she found.

"Why don't we just pull up to the drop-off area? Probably better signage there."

"Let's walk together. No need to rush, right?"

She nervously looked at signs even though I knew exactly where we were going. It had been nearly 10 years, but I knew where my mom's first class would be. It was weird being in the halls as an alum. I wondered what was it like for her.

She looked through the door of her classroom where the professor was fumbling with the projector.

“Geez, he looks like a professor I had decades ago, like he came out of a time capsule--tweed, corduroy and all! What do I call him?”

“Hopefully he’ll tell you, but if not, ‘professor’ is pretty safe, or you can do what I did and look at him uncomfortably until he acknowledges you.”

“It seems terribly awkward to call him ‘professor’--he’s young enough to be my son-in-law,” at which she elbowed me. I rolled my eyes. “I mean, not awkward for me, but for him, right?”

“You’ll find what’s right. You’re good with people. These are people, just like anyone else. You’ll love it. You’ll be great.” I rambled off many more “you’ll” affirmations, grasping to assure her of how great going to college would be. But would college be good to her? The advisor tried to tell my mom that there was no longer such a thing as a “non-traditional student,” but the students waiting to go in the classroom looked pretty traditional to me. How would they react once they realized my mom was their classmate, not me?

I must have still been spewing anxious encouragement when I felt my mom’s hand on my wrist. “You’re right, this is going to be great.” She punched each word, as she does when she is reassuring me or herself.

“Do you want me to stick around? I can get reacquainted with the campus and meet you back here at the end of class.”

“Nonsense. You haven’t seen Janice in years. You should definitely visit while you’re in the area. Pick me up whenever, as long as it’s after 3. Bye!” She walked in, head first.

I stuck around, tallying each student walking into her class. Not one looked a day over 18. I wished she had taken her gen eds at night with the other, well, *real* adults.

I lingered. The professor seemed dull, but nice. He had the class introduce themselves, and I had to hear my mom's voice. There it was, about nine introductions in:

“Hi, all. I'm Mom!” The class genuinely laughed. She talked about her recent travels. “Now I'm here for the next adventure!” What a charmer. After texting Janice to confirm plans, I passed by the classroom door and saw three students talking and laughing with my mom. *Of course she'll be just fine*, I thought. *She always is.*

Mary Stingler isn't oblivious to notions of where she does and doesn't belong. She simply assures everyone that they belong.