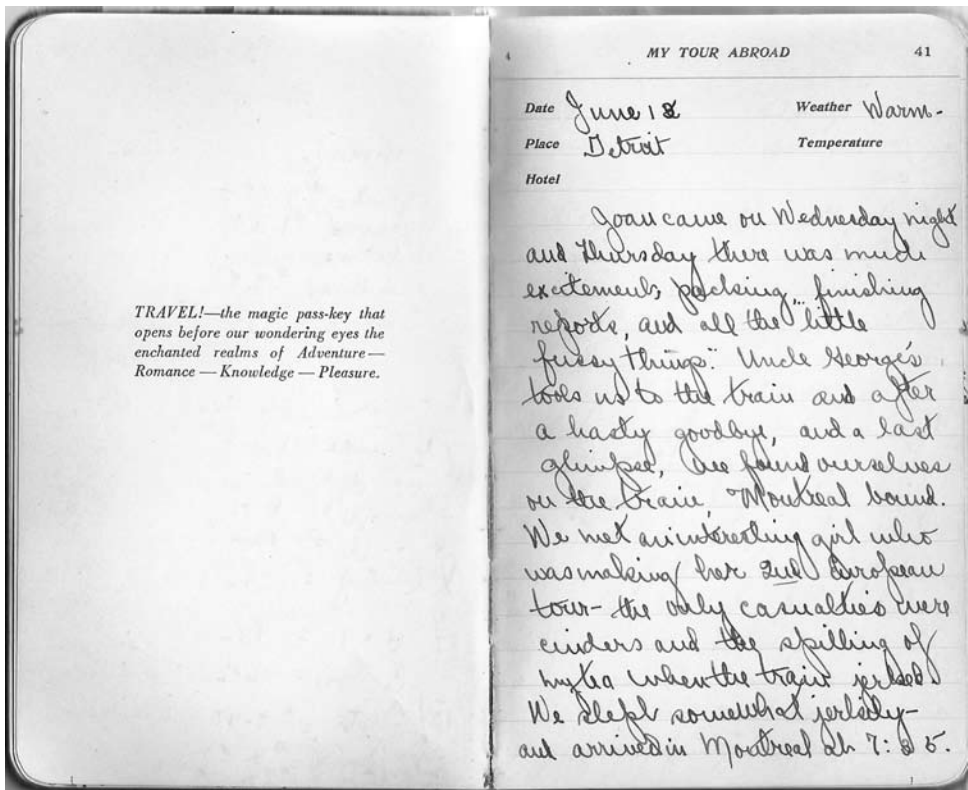


*Trueheart*

The journal is dark leather, embossed in gold with “A Record of My Tour Abroad.” Which is just what my mother did—record. June 1930: Europe caught between two wars, my mother’s world expanding. The twenties a wisp of memory as the country rushed pell-mell toward its future.

I open the book to see what was in store for her: flags of all nations, a list of currencies and exchanges, practical tips on everything from luggage to taxis to hotel protocol. “Be sure that your shoes are comfortable, and on shipboard, rubber soles and heels are desirable.” And after that, the diary begins.



I turn the pages to meet the young woman I've seen before—the one whose hair is hidden under a dark cloche, standing at the rail of a ship, arms linked with another woman whose hair flies away in the wind. My mother's

dress is dark, with tiny white buttons running down its length, a white collar, and—yes—white cuffs. White stockings, too, like the ones worn by her friend



whose scarf is thrown carelessly around her neck and whose shoes, with their low heels and delicate strap, give her the shapely look of someone ready for something. My mother's shoes are the giveaway. Sturdy, flat-heeled shoes that lace. Practical. Good for walking. Good for practically everything—except letting your hair fly out.

Standing at the brink of something large, my mother looks down, and away from the lens. What will she learn about herself as she embarks on this journey? I read to find out . . .

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I open the pages to meet a woman younger than I can remember ever being. Her world so fresh there was no vocabulary for it. Or rather, there was a vocabulary that did not do justice to the wonder she was feeling. Who am I to talk about her purple prose—who am I, who likes nothing better than to test language to see how much it will bear?

I want to be sympathetic as I invent stories from these fragments of text, these lifeless lists of things seen and done, seen and done, these accounts that come briefly to half-life, then slide back into the obscurity of abstraction. I want to be, but I am not. Because, in the end, her abstractions disappoint me. What is a “good sort”? What does it mean, “too good to be true”? What does my mother mean when she says something is “especially interesting” and then stops, mid-thought, without saying why?

But isn't this the nature of a diary? How could she be expected to know what will rise to consequence? Suppose Hitler had been more successful. My mother's diary would be the “before” that precedes the long “after.” It would show us what we had lost—places and people and a point of view. Historians would pounce on her peripheral observations: the mention of a Jewish woman

who was afraid on the ferry, the negro dancing with a white girl at a nightclub in Paris, the Germans who stood up and sang their national hymn. My mother's innocence would seem prophetic.

Who am I to judge? And yet I judge. I grant myself that right. This is more than the curiosity I might feel if I had found the book at a garage sale, picked it up for two dollars and been intrigued by the date or the colored drawings of steamship funnels and house flags, the odd inscriptions in the back: 2 Ys U R, 2 Ys U B, I C U R, 2 Ys 4 Me. Then, I would read it aloud, laughing occasionally, almost awed by the guileless world it reveals. But this is my mother, and I want her to be more than she appears to be.

So I make my way through her diary alternately enchanted and repelled. Why is my own mother such a cliché? The eternal embarrassment of the child. My adolescent self at war with her late blooming. Yes, and more—because I was born in the “after,” and my world did not contain her ingenuousness.