

[Home](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Autumn 2007](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

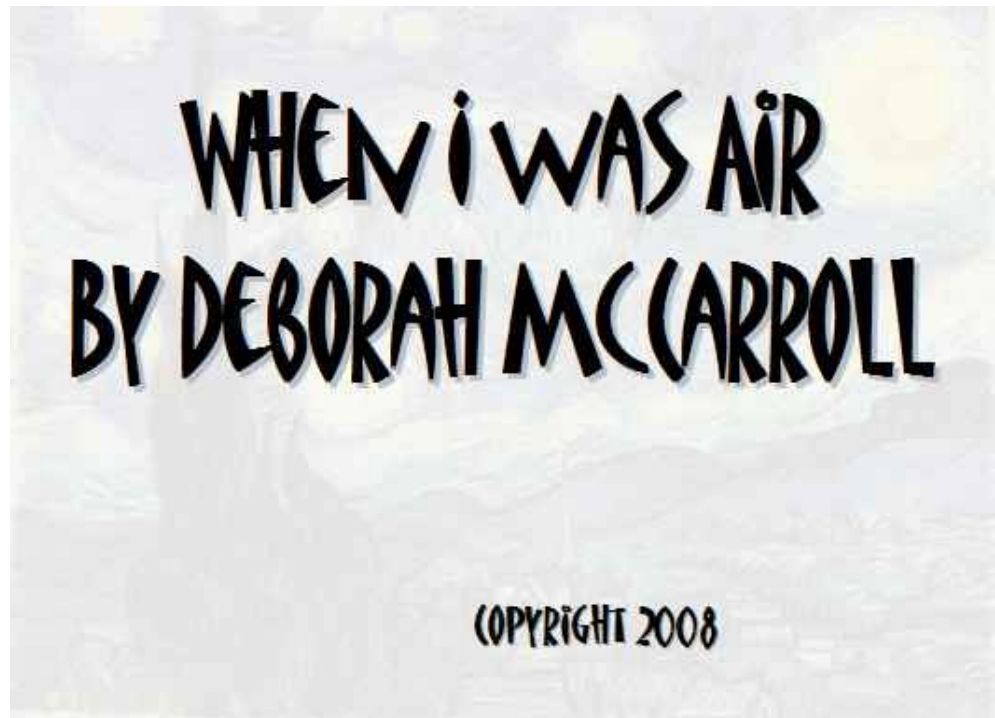
[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)



Ma had been in and out of hospitals most of my life before she showed up at my first grade classroom door. She stood quietly in the frame, a frayed vinyl satchel dangling from her fingers. "Debbie? Your mother is here."

We'd walked the shoulder of the highway out in that thirsty New Mexico desert for three days, sleeping where we could. A sour Salvation Army shelter one night—the staff looking wrung out, and those poor creatures on the wall-to-wall cots looking a good deal worse. A trailer park laundry-mat in the middle of a town you could spit across—the dingy room all ticking fluorescents and air perfumed with years of sweat and powdered detergent. And one miserable night was spent in a ravine, when the sun began to sink down the ribbon of road and us without so much as a match or other caring soul in sight. The sky turned inky black and the stars peeked on one by one. So many stars. Clear and bright and cold. It became hard to see and I tripped on a rut in the shoulder.

She stopped then, sighed, and headed down the bank that sloped away from the highway. "Come on kid, let's get some sleep." She brushed an area clear and sat down on the ground, unsnapping the satchel's shiny clasp. I sat next to her as she started removing various pieces of clothing. Her blue dress and hound's tooth blouse. Her black skirt.

She pulled me up close and draped the clothes over us making a patchwork quilt. She flattened the satchel and slid it under our heads as a makeshift pillow. As we lay down she curled around me.

"How much farther, Ma?" I could feel her warm breath against my ear.

"Not very," she said.

"Do you think we'll get there tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow. Yes"

"What's Gallup like?"

"Oh, it's like anywhere, I guess. A place." She squeezed me tight. "My little doll. What would I do without you? Huh? I'd be pretty lonely out here, I guess."

"Me too," I said.

"See you in my cheams, kid. I mean dreams, I mean cheams," she whispered.

"See you in mine."

I drifted off to sleep then, finally swimming and falling into unconsciousness. I dreamed I was riding in my brother's old Chevy, Ma at the wheel, though she didn't drive in real life. She was laughing and waving out the window, hardly watching the road at all. "Isn't it lovely, kid?" she shouted. "Isn't it just lovely?"

I was wrenched awake by the thunderous roar of an eighteen wheeler racing past. Light flooded the roadside, throwing long shadows against the earth and the wind billowed up dirt making us sputter and spit. Then, in an instant it was gone, leaving us to our pounding hearts and gritty eyes.

She turned over stiffly, moaning through her arthritis, dislodging the precarious blanket. I replaced the pieces—carefully arranging each scrap to cover us—and draped myself over her the best I could against the cold. Throughout the night she would groan as she moved in stiff pain. Trucks pounded past on their way to Albuquerque or Flagstaff, hauling livestock or grain or maybe hay. Throughout the night I kept vigil over the shifting quilt, waking to tug this bit here or tuck that bit there.

Slowly the black of night receded and a thin ribbon of pink washed up the sky. I hitched myself up on one elbow to rub sleep from my eyes, my hair damp with dew, a film of dust covering me. Ma turned over on her back and attempted to sit up.

I got to my knees, gripped her under the elbow and helped her to her feet.

She limped around a bit, testing the temperamental hip. I could remember the long nights she worked as a Registered Nurse. When she'd get home as the early morning light sifted through the lace curtains in our small kitchen. I'd watch her hobble around just like this, grimacing, as she sank into a chair; her white uniform thick with the smell of illness and antiseptic, her eyes tired and sad.

She pulled a bit of grass from her hair, glancing at me and chuckling. "Well, that was something, wasn't it?"

She shook out each piece of clothing, carefully folding and refilling the satchel. She rubbed her face and slapped at her clothes, sending dust to float on the morning chill. I pulled bits of grass and goat head thorns from the hem of her skirt, patting at a few stray patches of dirt. We brushed teeth with dribbles of water from a crumpled plastic bottle and she applied a fresh coat of lipstick—carefully lining her lips and dabbing at the crimson strays in her compact mirror. She combed my hair, wiped down my face and neck and handed me a tissue, instructing me to clean out my ears.

After passing inspection she nodded and we started up the ravine to the level ground of the highway's shoulder. She produced the water bottle and a bundle of foil-wrapped tortillas from the satchel. Plucking one of the flat breads free, she tore off a half and handed it to me. We walked at a leisurely pace, eating the bread and taking in a morning, rare and unseen by many eyes.

We followed that stretch of highway the whole of the morning and on into the afternoon before dragging into a Micky Ds in some little town or other. She ordered a Big Mac and a water. We sat at a table that smelled like pine cleaner and we paused to bow our heads and whisper a prayer. Then she cut the sandwich in half with a plastic serrated fork and slid the half on the paper wrapper over to me.

"I like that top on you," she said, wiping her mouth with a paper napkin.

"You think so? I was thinking it was getting a little too, you know, baby for me."

"Oh no. Girls are wearing them like that now."

I got up and crossed the table to her side. "Your pearls are turned around." I said, working the clasp to the back of her neck.

"Oh thanks, kid. I just hate that." She tied a knot in the base of the strand and patted at them. "There, that ought to fix it. Aw, would you look at that? Now I've got a run." She ran a finger over the silvery scar in the fabric of her stocking just above the ankle. "I'm just a mess," she muttered.

"Where are we going, Ma?"

---

"Gallup," she said and she dabbed a bit of clear nail polish on the run, removing her shoe to work the line around to the inside where it wouldn't be as noticeable. "My cousin lives there and I'll be able to find work."

Talking to my mother was like reading the newspaper. She only gave you the who, what, when and where of it. Straight out. Just the facts, ma'am. Other people said things like "maybe" and "perhaps" or "I don't know." But Ma? Never. And so, how could a person not believe in her? Not believe that everything was just fine and dandy when she'd put out a hand and say, "It's time to go."

But eventually someone always finds us and these footsore miles evaporate like steam on a breeze. This last time it was my sister Judith coaxing us out of that shabby little motel. She'd convinced Ma that we should come live with her and her brand new husband Bob.

So, we took the satchel and moved into the spare bedroom at the end of that long narrow hallway in my sister's rented house. Ma was pretty sick, alright, talking to herself and laughing and screaming into the night. And then came the day that my sister told Mother she had to go downtown to sign some papers for her Social Security. We all piled into the car and we ended up in front of a boxy brown building that turned out to be the Saint Joseph Psychiatric Hospital. Judith got out of the passenger side and Bob sprinted around the back of the car to help Mother out of the back seat.

Boy, was she mad. He was able to get her as far as the front steps peaceably. Then she started swinging at him with this heavy tortoiseshell makeup case she sometimes used as a purse. I sat wincing in the back seat while he ducked and clung to the sleeve of her coat, trying to dodge the worst of it.

I suppose she reckoned she'd make a run for it once they got outside the car but Bob was on to her. Still, it was clear he had no idea what he was up against because he went ghost pale and his eyes grew wide and wild when that hunk of luggage came flying at him.

Ma was in the lockup a couple of months that time. I stayed with Judith and her hero hubby, which was not even a little bit like living with my mother. They had a lot of hippy friends and they smoked a lot of pot. They even had a room especially for that purpose. It had blacklights and posters in loud glowing colors. Long strings of beads in the doorway and a big velvet pillow in the middle of the floor that said Zig Zag.

Sleepy-eyed men and women wearing long hair and fringe would shuffle in and lie around that pillow sucking on a bubbling water bottle, smoke curling lazily from the top.

I got a taste of it once. It was spicy and dark. It hurt my lungs and made me gag and cough. Everyone around the pillow laughed and patted me on the back, mussing my hair and making noises about what a big girl I was.

It was in those electric days, under the care of my wild sister, that I experienced what it is to be truly free. Bob had a green hulk of a station wagon I called the Green Machine and during one warm summer night we went driving down Central Avenue in Albuquerque; all the windows thrown open and I in the very back with the seats folded flat. There was more room in the back of that car than in some of the motel rooms for which Ma had plunked down good money.

Warm wind whooshed through the wide window over the tailgate, whipping at my hair and face; the radio blasting while Bob and my sister sat miles away under the bright lights of the city street. I was lifted as joy washed over me and I was flying with the breeze and the music and the lights, and I became the air itself. Free to fly high above treetops and chimneys with no work nor chore to hold me to Earth. I was one with the same wind that blew through the wide, dry desert, where I would walk with my mother under a constant sun. The same draft that would whip at my ankles and find its way into my thirsty mouth.

I occasionally got to visit my mother while she was in that lonely hospital. They don't let little kids onto the ward so I had to wait outside the double doors—wire crisscrossing the skinny windows—while they told her she had visitors. They bent the rules and let her come out to see me. She'd sit, her folding chair next to mine, her arm draped over me, and she'd talk about the place.

"Mr. Garcia lost his wife and now he doesn't know where he is half the time, poor thing..." or, "Oh, that Margaret makes so much noise at night, I can't hardly get any sleep!" or, "He thinks he's one of the apostles and he's always trying to heal everyone—you know, a laying on of hands type thing? Just

---

---

here, on your head. I tell him only Jesus could do that." And always she would say, "I was so confused. I can't believe the things I thought were happening."

The pills they gave her made her hands shake so bad. She'd sit, talking with her fingers working in the air, as if turning radio knobs over and over. They'd be still for a few seconds if she'd work at it, but they'd just start right back to shaking as soon as she forgot about them.

Eventually they let her out and she came back to live with us at Judith's house, saying it was only until she could find work. She didn't want to impose. My sister and Bob didn't use the room with the Zig Zag pillow again—at least not that I saw—and everything was good and relatively normal for awhile. Ma and I would go for walks, breathing in the sweet grasses and listening for Starlings and Cactus Wrens. She'd make up songs and sometimes we'd dance. On Sunday mornings I'd crawl up on her lap so we could see what Beetle Bailey and Hi and Lois were up to.

Then one day she didn't hear me the first time I spoke; her eyes gone all glassy, her lips moving to secret conversations. She spent more time off on her own staring down the dirt roads with a hand shading her eyes, a faraway look just at the edges. And I knew. I knew it wouldn't be long before she'd grab that old brown satchel again. And we'd leave my sister and her whitewashed house and the lush green chili fields of that dusty farm town for the open road and the wild desert air.

---

**Copyright 2008, Deborah McCarroll.** © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.

---

**Deborah McCarroll** is the author of two previous novels, *The Kissed Sky* and *Shopworn*, as well as the memoir *The Long, Hot Walk*, which details her childhood spent in a Catholic boarding house with her schizophrenic mother in Gallup, New Mexico. McCarroll is also an accomplished painter and singer-songwriter and currently makes her home in Seattle, Washington.