

WILD CHILD: Girlhoods in the Counterculture  
Chapter 1: Water Baby, by Zoe Eakle

I guess my folks were trying out something new, but me, I never knew the difference. By the time I showed up they were already in British Columbia on the west coast of Canada. I was born in Sointula, the island of their destination.

Faded color photos create patchy images of who my parents were then. Snapshots of Dad with grown-out hair and thick dark beard, his jeans tucked into his gum boots, posing with homegrown hemp plants as tall as he is or sitting at the kitchen table pitting cherries from the tree in our backyard.

My mom's hair was long and straight and parted in the middle like a smooth dark stream around her freckled face. She said she didn't know what hard work was until they left the city. Pictures usually catch her in the middle of something, her sparkly eyes half closed from blinking at the camera. She is bending over a baby, or the dishes, or a row of weeding in the garden. Sometimes she is singing with a band on the front porch with a beer in her hand. Like my father, she is younger than I am today. Her long neck curves gently down into her back. She is beautiful.

And there's me, too young to remember myself, naked except for a hand-knit cardigan, crumbs or dirt on my face—it's hard to tell. I'm gazing earnestly into the camera. Staring up from a past turned to myth by memory and this word, "hippie," which apparently encompasses my childhood.

Sometimes when I introduce myself as Zoë, people ask, "Are your parents Greek?" And so I say, "No, they were hippies." I don't tell them the name presented itself to my parents during a particularly stellar acid trip. That would feed too much into expectation. Nevertheless, everyone gets an instant picture in their head. They are, of course, no closer to knowing the people in those snapshots.

When I go back to the island I try to imagine what my parents would have seen the day they moved there. What were their thoughts as they rumbled over potholes along the dusty gravel road? Blue-gray speckled rocks, driftwood and ocean on one side and on the other, merciless blackberry bushes guarding tall evergreens that stop just before the ceiling of the world. The forest interrupted here and there by clearings with small wooden homes.

It was late May, 1970. My parents had successfully crossed the border having declared their intention to emigrate, and had driven all day, anxious to reach the island. My mom was seven months pregnant with me, her first of two children. They were traveling in a GM panel truck, lovingly altered with a blowtorch to create Plexiglas skylights in the ceiling. They had asked a friend to install the windows right above where their heads rested on the sleeping platform. Underneath the platform lay all their worldly possessions.

The sun would be sinking low. Their truck would have just been transported from the ferry to the island by a Jaws of Life crane, with their dog barking on the passenger seat: The ferry didn't yet have a ramp that could support vehicles. They would be tired and eager to get to Sue's house, a drop-in mostly for American folks who had heard about Sointula and wanted to check it out. Did my father question the sanity of this venture? Did my mother wish for even a moment that she'd kept her job at the telephone company?

What the locals might have thought of all this activity is a book unto itself. Sointula was founded by Finnish immigrants in the late 1800s, who started a commune before communes were cool. They were sick of being used as cheap labor and decided to pool their resources and create a utopian community from the best of the communist and Marxist philosophies they had discussed back home. Sointula suffered many birthing pains but finally flourished in its small-town, island-onto-itself way. Although the utopian dream eventually fell by the wayside, it has never been entirely forgotten.

Then, along come these trippy hippie types to start a new way of living. The American hippies were mostly city folks and had no idea how to relate to the locals or even that they should. There were lots of Canadian alternative types all over doing the same thing and they undoubtedly had mixed reactions to these Americans coming in and taking over just by the sheer decibel of their enthusiasm.

Sue was Finnish, but had been raised in California. That afternoon when my parents turned into the gravel drive at her place, the first thing they saw was Sue's cedar-shake homestead to their right. Eight wide steps led up to its welcoming porch, big enough to comfortably seat the three or four folks who were probably there on that evening, smoking or drinking or toking or maybe all three. Maybe one or more people were tripping on mushrooms that night or groovin' on LSD, but probably not. Probably they were just hangin' out, listening to each other fill the night air with plans and stories. The Pacific Ocean drew itself to and from the shore across the street, murmuring watery sighs to itself under their rolling notes, paying them no mind.

It would have been just about twilight when they pulled into the drive. Twilight in Sointula will beckon your very soul. You can feel utterly alone there if you are in good company. That type of solitude is luscious. In those moments the land opens out to you and entreats you to breathe with it. Into the thousand different shapes of not-quite-round rocks on the beach, into the wild ocean and the barnacles and baby crabs. Breathe with the trees bowing and stretching into the wind. It is the kind of place that has convinced me in certain precious moments that I am no more or less marvelous than the rocks under my feet and the ocean before me.

There was also the little sauna to their left as they drove in, catching the last of the day's light on its two square windows. It had been converted for us into ten square feet of extra living space by a carpenter staying at Sue's. My parents had already

decided that I would be birthed at home on the island. They had been researching the process for months. Sue was all for it too and had found lots of information. Even so, they probably didn't think as they drove up that day and passed by the little sauna, "That's where we'll have our first child and she'll be born with the sound of the ocean in her ears." Probably they gave Sue a hug and made a beeline for the outhouse around back. Dad had met Sue and her husband, Seth, at the University of California at Davis three years earlier. My parents spent a lot of time with them there, putting together seed orders and supplies to use in Sointula. They spent hours discussing political notions and the whole idea of having an open communal household, supporting draft dodgers and wanderers and the like. My parents were going to look after Seth and Sue's house and property for them while they spent a year in Hong Kong. Seth was working on his master's in Chinese philosophy.

The whole atmosphere around their place at that time felt radical and exciting. People were living out their ideals and dreams of a flier, more open life. A Vietnam medic who went AWOL after returning to the States came and stayed for a while. A black man who was all fun and play passed through. He was on the run from some Black Panther caper that we never really did find out about.

In the midst of all this, my parents moved into the sauna and made it their home. As summer wore on and Mom's due date got closer, a lot of people asked if they could help or just be there. In this manner the unofficial guest list grew, and grew.

My mom's parents were excited about the birth but knew nothing of the "home" part. My mom thought it best to spare them the anxiety and decided not to mention it. She suggested that they come a week or two after the due date. "By then," she said, "things will have calmed down a little and we can all have a nice visit."

I was due in June but like any well-grounded hippie child, I decided that I'd come on out whenever I was ready. Although I did not arrive in June, my grandparents did, along with my mother's sister from New York. My grandmother took one quick look around that room and knew. The eye drops and gauze, the Whole Earth Catalog earmarked in the birth section, the basic guide for midwives open on the kitchen table, the piles of fresh linen and buckets for extra water, all in a ten-by-ten space, were pretty much dead giveaways. My mom told my grandma that she'd understand if they wanted to leave and come back when the whole thing was over. My grandmother looked at her like now she truly had lost her mind and said they would be staying.

She took my grandfather for a walk and said, "They're going to have that baby at home you know." To which my grandfather replied, "No they're not," as though the simple force of his words could bring modern medical care to the island. He essentially remained in denial right up until my mother was fully dilated.

There were about fifty people there on the night I was born. There was plenty of home-brewed liquor on hand, undoubtedly there was music, a guitar or two and

maybe even a banjo or a jew's-harp, and lots of potato salad. To this day everyone mentions the potato salad. Those homegrown potatoes are hard to beat.

My dad delivered me. My grandmother coached him. When Mom's afterbirth didn't come out right away, Dad was afraid to push her belly too hard and hurt her. My grandmother told him he bloody well better, and he did. All of us survived.

The AWOL medic was on hand that night, and he, along with several of my parents' friends, provided the invaluable service of ensuring that my grandfather got pie-eyed during the course of the affair. My grandfather was an operatic bass and I like to think he was singing drunken arias with the bluegrass band when I emerged.

Later, that sauna became a chicken shed; Sue and her partner built a new house higher up on the property; and the old homestead is used for storage now. It is so much smaller than I remember. Mold is beginning to creep up the walls but it still feels warm to me.

The sauna is gray and hollow, abandoned even by the chickens. I return the odd time just to stand there and look and try to see it as something other than Sue's chicken coop. The sun still filters in through those tiny windows and gaps in time in a way that whispers of a past I don't remember. Maybe one day somebody will decide that the whole area is an historical hippie site and they'll put a plaque on it: Sauna, Dwelling, Birthing Room, 20th Cent. (Actually, nailing a plaque onto that unassuming little structure would knock it down.)

Growing up in Sointula was in many ways grand. There were no locked doors and I had the whole forest, beach and ocean for a playground. There is a glimmer of peace inside me that comes from growing up in that place. My memory of Sointula goes beyond anything conscious to my salty core, which will always be grateful for having been born with the sound of the ocean in my ears. If nothing makes sense, I can look out over that vast body of water, and things won't necessarily make any more sense. But that's okay, because there I am with the whole Pacific Ocean at my feet.