

# Notes of a Mad Girl #8 - Martha and the Moon

I wasn't sure what I wanted to do after graduating in 1972 as an undergraduate from the University of Iowa so I headed to Vermont to visit Steve. He was going to school at Goddard College in Montpelier, Vermont. Steve asked me what my plans were. I was initially shocked that he didn't really have any suggestions that included the two of us.

I never questioned that I would continue making art but I seemed to need a plan now that didn't include coming home to Steve. He suggested speaking to one of the counselors at Goddard who apparently had loads of plans for anyone walking through her door. Even I was surprised at the sentence coming out of my mouth "I thought it would be kind of nice to head out west to study weaving with the Navajo's and learn about plant dyes". Where did any interest in weaving crop into my artistic make-up?

This lady, however, spit out an alternative that was equally inventive. She said that there was an American Indian woman named Martha Grass in Marland, Oklahoma that could sure use some help. Where was Oklahoma? Why hadn't I heard of this place other than the musical or as a prime character in a dust bowl? Why didn't my family say "hey...kids let's go visit Oklahoma this summer". "Wouldn't that be great?" In fact Oklahoma was so far removed from as a tourist Mecca in my neck of Pennsylvania that I now understand why our government marched Indians there to settle in the first place.

While speaking with the "I've got a plan for you" lady in Vermont, she wrote down a phone number.

I hitchhiked from Vermont to Iowa with a few problems hitchhiking through Manhattan. This was no small feat in 1972 and I eventually met up with my senior college roommate in Iowa. Everyone called her M.A. which was short for Marianne. M.A., a university friend from Thailand, Banlu Charukitsopa (phonetic spelling here) and I decided we'd head out west for a few weeks.

We didn't tell Banlu about our mode of transportation and it was quite the grand moment when we walked down to the highway in Iowa City with our backpacks and proceeded to point our thumbs in our direction of travel.

Since I was the "friendliest" person in this little troupe, it fell to me to entertain those truckers who picked us up. My two travel companions just refused to participate beyond "hi". I was tired of talking to guys who were clearly trying to get me alone for nasty deeds and I was irked at M.A. and Banlu who slept comfortably while I was basically chatting inanely for our rides.

Life improved when a father with two small boys picked us up in Wyoming. He and his wife had planned a driving trip to visit numerous Indian sites courtesy of some stunning articles in National Geographic. Just before their departure date their youngest baby girl got sick. When we hopped into their Volkswagen bus the two boys were literally screaming and sugar crazy. Apparently their dad had no cooking experience and admitted to feeding his boys a diet of high sugar cereals, soft drinks and candy.

That man's luck changed that day when he picked up three recently graduated students. Banlu was our designated chef and could feed hundreds on chicken and rice combinations. M.A. put the boys on a strict routine of games and naps and I enthusiastically embraced my role as shotgun driver. I loved reading maps in the front seat and finally chatting with this nice mid-west father of three.

The meandering drive through Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah to visit Indian sites was one of the most educational trips of my life. The boys were fun, the father was always thankful for our help and the hitch-hiking safety factor alone was tantamount to receiving a direct miracle from God. We drove with this wonderful family for five straight days.

Charlie lived in Borger, Texas. This was a spit of land shooting up the North-Westernmost corner of Texas. After all that western beauty, Borger Texas in my humble opinion was a sad and depressed vista. Charlie looked like Don Quixote and was a graduate law student at the

University of Iowa. I liked him because I was mad at Steven and thought I'd stop and see if there was anything more between our lives than hello. The sweet Volkswagen family dropped me off at Charlie's house even though the Panhandle wasn't on his National Geographic tour. I said my good-byes in the Panhandle of Texas and M.A. and Banlu continued their ride back to Iowa. They were safely dropped at their front doors in Iowa City and this man and his two boys made their way back to Minnesota with as little sugar in their bloodstreams as we could manage.

When Charlie heard what the counselor at Goddard College suggested he handed me the telephone and said to call this "Martha Grass" person. I dialed her number and after I said "hello" she squawked "where have you been?" I stammered my name and started to explain who I was but she abruptly said "I know who you are but where the hell are you and why aren't you here yet?" I thought that maybe she had confused me with someone else. But when she said "you were suppose to have been here three or four days ago" I thought that maybe the Goddard College lady had phoned Martha firsthand. I asked her how she knew I was coming and she said matter-of-factly that she had "read the moon". I told her that I would be there the next day.

Charlie took the notion of Martha Grass's reading of the moon as if I had said I wanted a drink of water and we started out in his car for a very, very small speck of a town north east of Oklahoma City. Marland was seventeen miles from Ponca City and remains in my memory as the most non-town I've ever seen. That's saying a lot having come from Penn, Pennsylvania. Marland had a post office and a grocery store on one side of the street that ran through town and a café and an appliance store directly opposite. The Indian Center was a small wood house painted white on the same side as the grocery store.

Charlie and I arrived late Sunday as the sun was setting and we weren't sure if the address was correct. Was this a house? Was this a "center"? We looked into the windows and saw a small kitchen, a middle room with a few chairs, and a front room with a desk and a chair. Items were here and there on the floor as if the place was abandoned. The yard was weedy and the whole place looked as if the

famous dustbowl had been pretty recent. Finally a few Indians drove up and let us in. We used the phone to call Martha and she said she'd see us the next day. We ate in the café, walked around the dirt roads of this prairie town and eventually met up with some strange acting Indian teenagers. I didn't realize that they had spent the evening sniffing paint. By the time Charlie had finished educating me on drugs that evening I had made up my mind that this was not what I had planned for my life after graduation. I had no skills as a social worker, I never understood drug usage, and I had absolutely no sympathy for anyone that relied on chemicals to make them happy.

Charlie was the better person who needed to stay in Marland Oklahoma. He was kind, understanding, sympathetic, knowledgeable, and could talk a rock into being reasonable. But he was trying to finish law school and I was just heading to nothing in particular.

The teenagers we met were angry, belligerent and had married their drug usage to heavy drinking. They obviously hated white men and Charlie was made very aware that evening that he fit that description to a "T". What I later found was that Indians did indeed hate white men but had no interest in hating white women or listening to their opinions. They just didn't hold white women responsible for their cruel plight in American History.

I don't remember if we slept on the littered floor of the Indian Center or in Charlie's car but I do remember meeting this short and stocky long braided Indian woman the next morning named Martha Grass. After five minutes listening to Martha I knew that I was staying in Oklahoma.

But I was wrong about Oklahoma's landscape. Once I actually sat in this state I was able to breathe in her raw beauty. Her soil was an intense orange-red and covered with prairie grasses that swayed with the slightest breeze. Coyotes howled and traveled in packs; the sky was surprising with every turn of your head; and the sunsets were wild enough that you thought the world had truly ended evening after evening. It was Oklahoma that made me realize that I was happiest when I was listening to nothing but natural sounds around me. In Oklahoma you had quality nature noise. The cicadas were so loud that one night I climbed a tree to kill one that kept me up.

Martha Grass, however, was the one reason I stayed. I knew that I was a naïve kid but even I knew that this woman was extraordinary. Martha roped me into Oklahoma by looking directly into my eyes and asking for my help. I trusted this powerful woman and believed every word she said as gospel.

Martha Grass had a plan and the least I could do was participate.