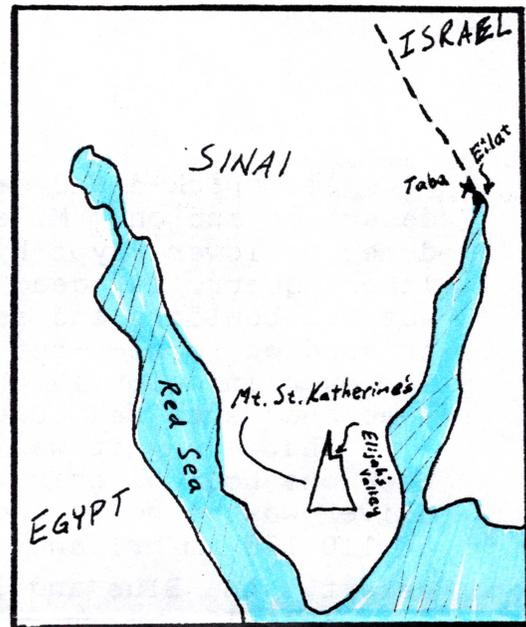


Dear family,

May 13, 1992

"We're at a stop by the Dead Sea on our way to Eilat. Funny land this: all twisted and gnarled. Nothing pleasant or easily green, all harsh and hard and cracked and dramatic with folds and crevices and overlaps that don't quite fit. Why do people fight over **this** rather than the hills of Virginia or the plains of Kansas? What an unwelcoming place in which to eke out a life."



Clinging to our only guide, "Footloose", Sandra and I were on our way south. We went from bus to bus and finally took to our feet, walking from check point to check point until we reached a sign that said, "Welcome to Egypt." We were in the Sinai.

Desolate. I'd certainly fear for my life to be stuck out there. It was anything but friendly. We wanted to change money at the first place we could. It was a Hilton, rising out of the lonely dunes around it. They wouldn't let us in. So we started walking farther into the desert, not sure of where to go, kept walking.

Footloose had said we could get a bus to Mt. St. Katherine's (alleged Mt. Sinai of the ten commandments). But when we asked we were told "No bus. Taxi" in very broken words. Fine. Kept walking and saw a "border tax" sign off to the side. We went in to pay (Footloose had said \$6.00 US, must be in dollars). They guy wouldn't take any currency but Egyptian pounds.

So we walked back to a sign that said "bank" and changed money. We'd brought all these shekels (Don't know what we were thinking) which they wouldn't take. I only had a handful of US dollar bills. We each traded \$10.00 and went back to pay tax hoping we'd have enough to live on and get around during our stay. Sandra was hurting and we were both feeling very lost. Now the only companion we'd had, Footloose too had left us stranded. I felt very uncomfortably alone and prayed we'd bump into some backpackers we could hook up with.

Within a few minutes out of our border tax, a German couple came up and asked if we were going to St. Katherine's. They explained they still had some empty seats as they were 20 people and needed 4 taxis.

Baruch Ha Shem.

So we became part of YMCA tours. They gave us some hot pita along with everyone else. We didn't have to haggle over taxis and best of all we were not alone.

Now we had several hours of peace in which nothing was required of us. I sat back and looked out the open window of the taxi, savoring the wind (albeit sandy) on my face. This was the Sinai.

All cracked and desolate like Israel, but bigger. The desert on and on. Miles and miles of it--not the light fine sand dunes of lower Egypt by Cairo. This wasn't so polished. It was like a quarry lay dead for years, or an avalanche of stones. It was all boulders and sand on a sort of continuum. Rocks on sand, or sand on rocks---but there's no clear distinction between them. Not even in color is there variety, life. It's all grey---from deep shades to red tones---but grey.

That's why it was so altogether breath taking when after over one hour of this we turned yet another curve (Our taxi driver was going pell mell up and down and reeling right and left at 110-120 km/hr) and saw life --just as big and vast as the dead desert. And Blue and living, sparkling, moving...

The blue was most unusual: clear divisions in the water (not a blurring one into the other) of aqua to navy blue to turquoise to khaki green. Beautiful.

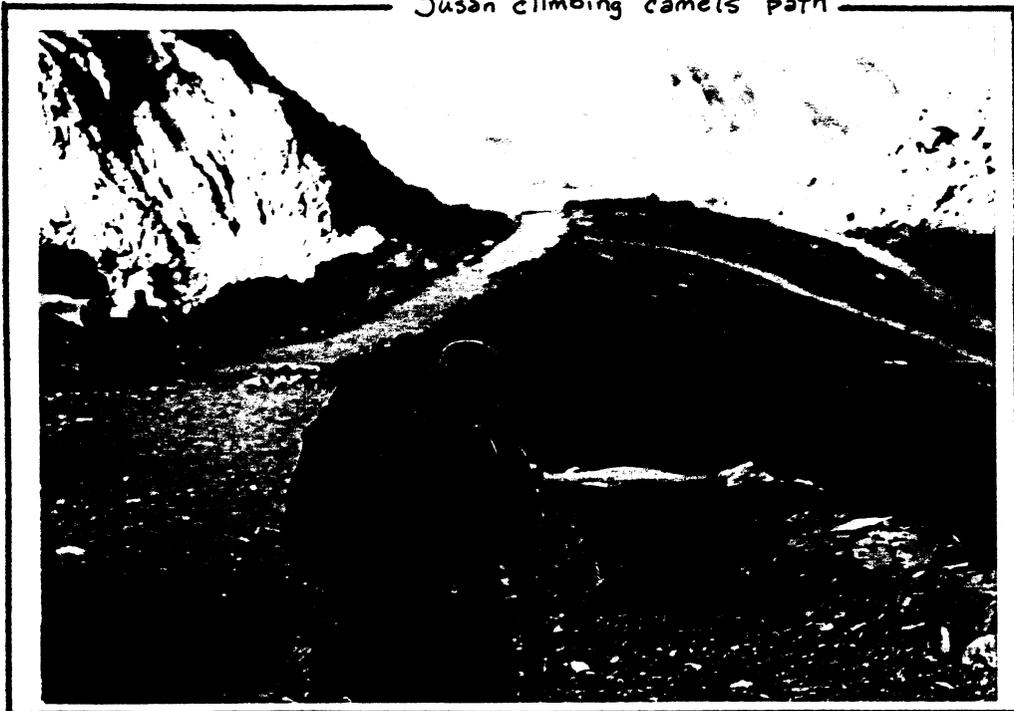
Our taxi stopped to wait for a fellow taxi to fix a flat. But after three hours we'd arrived at the foot of Mt. St. Katherine's. The top of Mt. is 2,639 meters.

We piled out and piled on suntan lotion, dark glasses, an odd assortment of head coverings and our packs carrying sleeping bags, bottles of water, and long underwear for the 0 C desert night.

It took us three hours to hike up the Mountain. We switched off and on with the big (35lbs?) pack. My body was sore.

We camped out at a small valley near the peek called Elijah's place. There Sandra and I ate some pita and cookies we had, left over from Jerusalem. The Germans were beginning to cook dinner, stake out spots to sleep, and change into warmer clothes (in plain view of each other in mixed company!) for the 0C desert night.

Susan climbing camels' path



Sandra and I were more modest. We went around to the left of the big rocks we were on and found a semi secluded spot. There we relieved ourselves and changed.

The temperature dropped frighteningly quick with the sun downing and I needed to add some more inner layers. I wasn't going to walk around back again, so I took a deep breath and with Sandra assuring me it was perfectly alright, I undressed and redressed and then stuffed myself quickly into my sleeping bag.

As we were trying to fall asleep, the Germans gathered around a ukelele and started singing. I didn't recognize any tunes, but they sounded like Christian hymns. Then some prayers. It was a wonderful way to be tucked in.

Sandra lay beside me; people bedded down with German murmurs and I used a flashlight to journal even though the moon was out and full and I kept thinking someone had forgotten to turn out the light. The sky was full of stars. I liked their twinkle. So many stars. I looked for a constellation or two that Dennis had pointed out, but there were too many stars to see patterns. Guess it was the same moon as anywhere, but I felt worlds and times away from Dallas. And I thought eagerly about hitting Eilat---civilization with a known language and enough money and familiar territory. My back ached from the hike and I wasn't at all sure whether my legs would be solid enough by morning to carry me anywhere. But neither was the thought of exile on Elijah's Valley very appealing.

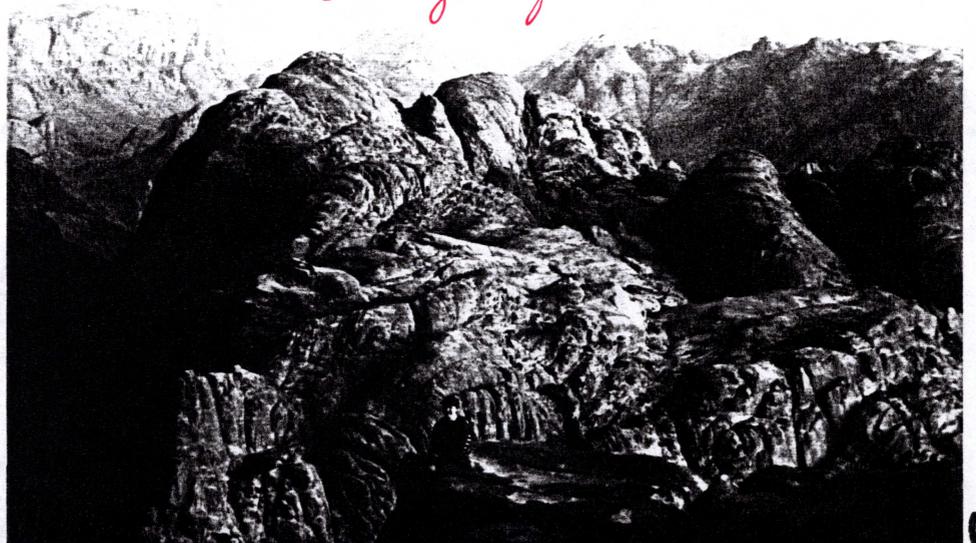
I didn't sleep too well---partly because of the cold; partly because of the hard and stony and poky ground; and partly because I had my eye on our stuff.

It turned out to be rather pointless to have stayed up watching our things. Because at 4:30 we got up and climbed up to the top top, leaving all our packs and bags unattended. Nonetheless, I was relieved to find out we'd climb the rest of the way up without lugging them.

Climbing the last piece to top of Mt. Sinai. I was the last of the line of 22 of us. It zig zagged. Sun was still down but glow coming up making sky light blue. As they doubled back ahead of me over a ridge there was a line of silhouettes. Touching.

The sunrise was OK, but not spectacular; rather hazy. I liked the mountains. They were awesome, folds and folds of them red and dry. No vegetation; only occasional little scrub. No life---no lizards; no spiders. Just geology. In the raw. And somewhere over there we could see into Africa, Sonia's home.

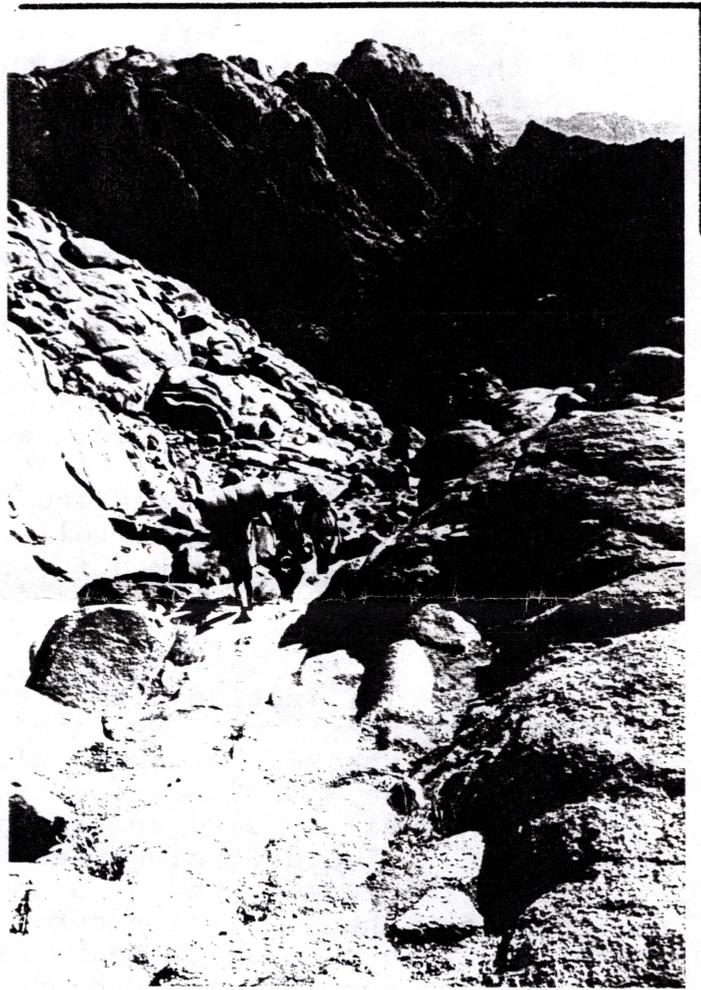
Can you find me?



We went up and down without our packs, but I was becoming gelatinous. We had still the whole way down with our big packs. It was nice to finally have light. We could see to pack up our things. Before we headed down, Sandra and I needed to return to our secluded spot, but I'd seen one of the guys head off in just that directions moments earlier. So we waited. When we saw him return, we started. He turned, smiling, "Oh, sorry. Last night our leader said, 'Left side for men; right side for the women.' I guess no one translated for you."

We came down the 4,000 steps instead of the Camel path we had gone up. Sandra carried the big pack the whole time. My legs were spaghetti.

Soon after we got to the bottom monastery, our taxis took us back to Taba. And from there we got a bus on in to Eilat. We had been on bread and water for 2 days. I thought hungrily of the watermelon I had cut up and left in Sandra's fridge.



Sandra (the farthest) down the 4,000 steps

May 14, 1992 5:30 pm

"We're on this side of the border, having drinks on the beach. Most everyone seems to have gone in. It would be wonderfully quiet except for some obnoxious metal reggae music playing loudly from the cafe behind us."

Love,

Susan



-thanks to
Dennis for edit
and lay-out help



Susan & Sandra at
Taba boarder
(Israeli side)

