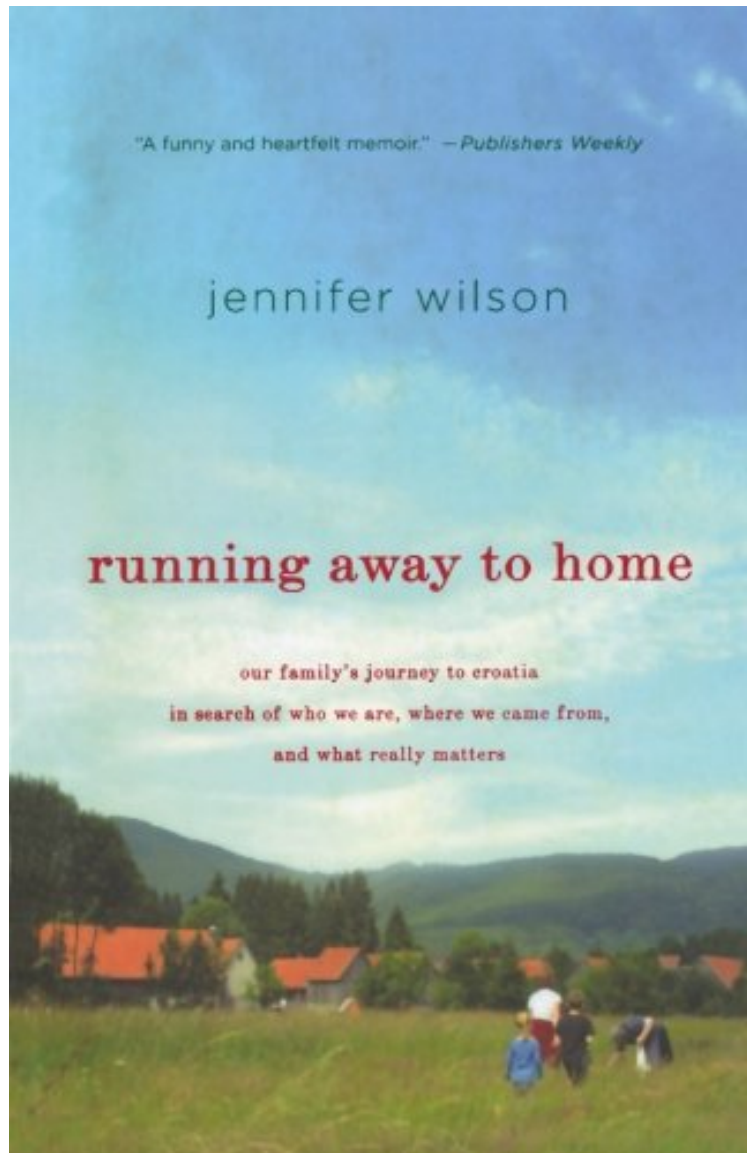


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Running Away to Home: Our Family's Journey to Croatia in Search of Who We Are, Where We Came From, and What Really Matters

Jennifer Wilson

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before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Running Away to Home: Our Family's Journey to Croatia in Search of Who We Are, Where We Came From, and What Really Matters*:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Close to home By DFWI loved this book and not just because I'm a Radosevich and have visited Mrkopalj looking for my family but this book would have captured my attention just because it gives such a vibrant description of the land and the people. I could feel that I was there and since I was at the same places I could picture everything Ms. Jennifer described. Croatia is a beautiful country and the people are so hard working, survivors, (and closed mouthed!) that I am proud to be one of them and this book tells this story brilliantly. The yellow church, the cemetery, the Konzum, the tourist bureau, the bars, the little towns nearby, the bear crossing signs on the roads, the Bastrop Hotel (my experience at the Bastrop was much better than hers even though we were the only two in the whole place when we stayed there), the ski slopes and on and on. This is a must read for anyone who has relatives from Mrkopalj or for anyone who just loves to travel. Excellent book!! Excellent. Dobro!
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Recommend this book for anyone interested in Croatia By Celtic Man When I starting reading this book, I didn't realize that I wouldn't put it down until I finished it. I kept its memory in my mind while I toured Croatia a month later. Unfortunately I didn't get a chance to visit the author's grandfather's hometown. Book gave me a in depth understanding of Vroatisns living in a small town.
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great read for someone who loves to travel internationally and connect with the local versus tourist culture. By Laurie Great read for someone who loves to travel internationally and connect with the local versus tourist culture. I found myself not thinking of the author as "whiny," as someone had labeled her, but honest in how she was feeling through the journey - introverted or lacking confidence at times, having to push herself to live in the moment and have the courage to insert herself into other people's lives/experiences. I hated when she was hesitant, but not because it made me not like her, but because I wanted her to shed her insecurities, jump in, and have fun. I like reading books with someone who is relatable (read: not perfect) and triumphs in the end.

A middle class, Midwestern family in search of meaning uproot themselves and move to their ancestral village in Croatia "We can look at this in two ways," Jim wrote, always the pragmatist. "We can panic and scrap the whole idea. Or we can take this as a sign. They're saying the economy is going to get worse before it gets better. Maybe this is the kick in the pants we needed to do something completely different. There will always be an excuse not to go..." And that, friends, is how a typically sane middle-aged mother decided to drag her family back to a forlorn mountain village in the backwoods of Croatia. So begins the author's journey in *Running Away to Home*. Jen, her architect husband, Jim, and their two children had been living the typical soccer- and ballet-practice life in the most Middle American of places: Des Moines, Iowa. They overindulged themselves and their kids, and as a family they were losing one another in the rush of work, school, and activities. One day, Jen and her husband looked at each other—both holding their Starbucks coffee as they headed out to their SUV in the mall parking lot, while the kids complained about the inferiority of the toys they just got—and asked themselves: "Is this the American dream? Because if it is, it sort of sucks." Jim and Jen had always dreamed of taking a family sabbatical in another country, so when they lost half their savings in the stock-market crash, it seemed like just a crazy enough time to do it. High on wanderlust, they left the troubled landscape of contemporary America for the Croatian mountain village of Mrkopalj, the land of Jennifer's ancestors. It was a village that seemed hermetically sealed for the last one hundred years, with a population of eight hundred (mostly drunken) residents and a herd of sheep milling around the post office. For several months they lived like locals, from milking the neighbor's cows to eating roasted pig on a spit to desperately seeking the village recipe for bootleg liquor. As the Wilson-Hoff family struggled to stay sane (and warm), what they found was much deeper and bigger than themselves.

"Wilson's memoir isn't so much about assimilating to Croatian culture as it is about finding family and, therefore, acceptance in unlikely places. A fun-filled, revealing peek into the Croatian countryside nevertheless, it will be enjoyed by travelogue lovers and admirers of Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* (1989) and Frances Maye's *Under the Tuscan Sun* (1996)." ?Katharine Frank, Booklist "This thoughtful, amusing tale reads like a novel and will have wide appeal." ?Melissa Stearns, Franklin Pierce Univ. Lib., Rindge, NH, Library Journal "The author's voice is consistently infused with an energetic spunkiness, complimented with passages of sage introspection...[an] appealing travelogue of discovery and renewal." ?Kirkus Book s "In her funny and heartfelt memoir, she packs up her husband and two young children from Des Moines, Iowa, with the plan to live a simpler, more connected life in the ancestral home in Croatia and to learn about her immigrant story." ?Publisher's Weekly "Running Away to Home is a sweet journey of reconnection. Wilson and her family move from Big Box America to her ancestral home in Croatia, and in the process become that most precious of things, the truly connected family." ?Janine Latus, New York Times bestselling author of *If I Am Missing or Dead: A Sister's Story of Love, Murder, and Liberation* "Jennifer Wilson travels and writes with heart and pluck. With her husband and kids in tow, she pushes past all her comfort zone and shows us that adventure is a worthy and rewarding family pursuit. Filled with memorable characters and lovely epiphanies, her tale inspires us to

rethink how we define 'family' and 'home.'" ?Jeannie Ralston, author of *The Unlikely Lavender Queen: A Memoir of Unexpected Blossoming* "I like the heart and good humor of Jennifer Wilson: she has given us a book about the ways sense of place is heightened by displacement and the most enlightening scraps of history must be coaxed from the darkest corners." ?Michael Perry, author of *Population: 485: Meeting Your Neighbors One Siren at a Time* About the Author JENNIFER WILSON is an award-winning writer who has chronicled her travels, both epic and around the corner, in *National Geographic Traveler*, *Gourmet*, *Esquire*, *Midwest Living*, *Better Homes Gardens*, *Frommer's Budget Travel*, *Parents*, and *Disney Family Fun*. *Running Away to Home* was awarded Best Nonfiction Book of 2011 by the American Society of Journalists and Authors. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. chapter one October 2008 Dawn had not yet broken as I wrestled my suitcase out of my room above the bar in Mrkopalj, a tiny Croatian village nestled in a low mountain range that looks like the Alps but with fewer people and more wild boars. I sweated my luggage down the creaky back stairway, careful to step quietly for fear that some of the rowdy drinkers whose noise had kept me up all night would now be snoozing somewhere among the empty bottles in the brown-on-brown murk of the bar. I crept across a quiet courtyard surrounded by weeds, my breath coming in icy puffs, and I threw my stuff into the trunk of my rented Volkswagen Polo. As I hurriedly rubbed the fog off the windshield with my coat sleeve, hungry bears were creeping down those mountains to rob the wilting gardens of the village. They wouldn't find much. Most of the cabbages in Mrkopalj (pronounced MER-koe-pie by the locals) were fermenting in wooden barrels by now; potatoes were stacked in red net bags in root cellars. What the bears did not know (and I didn't know yet, either) is that they would find more action at the local drinking establishment that was now in my rearview mirror, a place operated by a man who was, in spirit, one of them. The last shreds of night still cloaked Mrkopalj's eight hundred residents and their yard chickens as I skidded past Jesus and the robbers on Calvary, the sheep near the post office, and the dark doorway of a drunken tourism director. This was the land of my maternal ancestors, the village my great-grandparents left behind when they immigrated to America a hundred years ago. From what I'd seen so far, it hadn't changed much since they left. This, in theory, was a good thing, considering that my husband, Jim, and I were planning a back-to-basics family sabbatical abroad with our two little kids as America's economy hit the skids. In the spirit of scouting possibilities, I planned to explore Mrkopalj for a week. I fled after thirty-six hours. The engine of my tiny Euro car whined as I floored it out of last century. One urgent thought pulsed continuously through my mind as the sun began to rise: Get me the hell out of here. I had come to Mrkopalj in search of home. A rustic, simple country home that I hoped to recognize on some deep and spiritual level. Preferably something that smelled like baking bread, or maybe hay. Though I knew so little about Mrkopalj when I set out on this scouting mission, I'd been to enough of my older relatives' funerals to know that I look just like them, with knobby cheekbones and eyes so deep set that I'm pretty sure they'll eventually emerge from the back of my head. In a way, Mrkopalj is an essential part of who I am. Unfortunately, I discovered, this revealed me to be isolated, mildly alcoholic, and dentally challenged. So that was disappointing. As I mentioned above, Jim and I had been working up the courage to do something we'd always dreamed about: escape to a place where we could live simply with our kids, Sam and Zadie. We'd shared the dream of living overseas ever since we'd met and married ten years before in Des Moines, Iowa. The dream faded as we built our careers—me as a moderately successful travel writer, he as an architect. It disappeared altogether when the kids came along. We dove blindly into the blur of the American family frenzy, with all its soccer practices and frivolous shopping trips to Target. We worked. We drove the kids around. We shopped. We were chest-deep in the fray when the escape fantasy began to revive in me. I wanted to get back to that essential kernel of connection that had brought Jim and me together in the first place. We'd worked hard and happily to carve out our own version of the American Dream. We renovated a house together in lieu of dating. When we married, we promised that above all, we'd provide each other with an interesting life. We raised two babies in our homemade house, where I planted big gardens under the open sky of the uncrowded state where we both grew up. Then, somewhere along the line, things got complicated. I worked during naptimes and at night while I stayed home with the kids, writing in my half sleep, parenting in the same manner—I was doing it all but none of it well. I found myself mindlessly rushing to school or to swimming lessons or to ballet or to work or making another trip to the store; anything to distract my mind from the endless needs of the kids and the longest single-syllable word in human history: Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahm. The manufactured schedule replaced a more tangible life. And really, Sam and Zadie just wanted to hang out at home and wrestle and play beauty shop with Dad, though the 6:00 to 7:30 P.M. window of time that Jim actually spent with his children was filled with the chaos of supper, baths, and bedtime. We ran because we couldn't sit still. Neither of us knew why. As we were living this life of distraction, we began to accumulate things. At final count, Jim had bought three grills—the last one cost us four digits. "You can make naan in it!" he'd announced at the unveiling, stepping aside on the porch to reveal a large oval-shaped ceramic urn mounted on a wooden platform. It looked like an altar. But I wasn't in any position to judge. My shoe collection closely resembled a DSW store in my closet. Restlessness circulated through our house like that one smell that happens when a mouse crawls into the ductwork and dies. Sort of vague. Faint. But pervasive and disturbing. I'm not lodging a complaint here; we were comfortable physically, and that's more than I can say about three-quarters of the world. But for that very reason, it just didn't seem like the right way to live anymore. Jim and I looked at each other across the shopping

cart one Saturday afternoon, both of us holding the Starbucks that accounted for \$150 of our monthly household budget, SUV idling in the parking lot, kids grouching that the Lego set they'd chosen was somehow lacking, and asked ourselves: Is this the American Dream? Because if it is, it sort of sucks. It was into this void that Mrkopalj came calling. In July 2008, my great-aunt died. Sister Mary Paula Radosevich was the last of the immigrant family. Because no one else was interested, the nuns gave me her personal papers, which she'd stored in a bronze-colored tin lockbox. To most of my family, the old relatives were old news. But I thought knowing more about them might help guide my own. My olive-skinned mom rarely mentioned that she was descended from thick-accented immigrants, full mustaches upon both the men and the women. I'd once asked her where our family came from, and she would only answer "Iowa." I sensed some shame about these poor ancestors who'd toiled in coal mines, or maybe it was just her natural reticence. The night after Sister Paula's funeral, when the kids were in bed, I nestled on the family room couch and sifted through that tin box. I dug out her modestly short autobiography. In shaky upright cursive, she had written that her parents, Valentin Radosevich and Jelena Eskra, had come to America from Mrkopalj, Croatia. Valentin and Jelena's tale had been furtively tucked away as the Radosevich clan rose to middle-class prosperity. With my generation, their story had nearly vanished. I wished I had more to teach Sam and Zadie about our roots. I knew not one old recipe. Few Croatian words. No helpful bedtime stories in which the misbehaving child gets disemboweled by wolves. But this felt like a start. I read that Valentin and Jelena had had six children. I didn't know the brothers. But the sisters meant the world to me when I was a girl. The elder Radosevich women, those chuckling old hens, short of stature and big of butt, doted on me, each in her own way. There was Mary, who became Sister Paula, the oldest, and the only one who went to college. She'd become the principal at a Catholic grade school in Des Moines, and at her funeral her former students told me she was strict but fair. I think that's code for mean. But with me, Sister Paula was attentive and inquisitive. How was I doing in school? Was I making classwork my priority? Higher even than softball and boys? I grew up in Colfax, Iowa, where the only black person in town bagged groceries and lived at the dump, and Sister Paula urged me to broaden my understanding of the world, to consider travel a crucial part of my education. She was the one who after hearing that my parents wouldn't let me see Grease, placed a call to my mother to tell her it was a defining movie of a generation and I must see it. And so I did. Annie was the middle sister, called Auntie by all the cousins. Auntie wore a girdle, a fascinating device of physics with levers and fulcrums, underneath her cotton housedress. I know about the girdle because Auntie would let me come into the bathroom during her morning constitutional so I could snap and unsnap her stockings from her garters. She died when I was a little girl, but not before she sewed an entire wardrobe for my Barbie dolls and ruined my palate by stirring butter and salt into my baby food. Katherine was the youngest. My Grandma Kate. My mother's mother. I loved her above all others. Toni perms had burnt her jet-black hair until it was crisp and brittle, and her eyebrows were singed from lighting Misty menthols on the coil of her electric stove. Her oversized sweaters sparkled with sequins. She drove her metallic-blue Volare just a few notches below the speed of sound. I was lonely in my mother's harsh and nervous universe. We seemed so mismatched as mother and daughter. An unhappy woman stranded in a small town, Mom was prone to days of angry silence. I was an intense and curious kid who seemed born to question. In Wednesday-night church school at Immaculate Conception, my classmates would pass me wadded-up notes bearing questions that they were to...