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*On Leaving*

I read somewhere that the road is the agent of chaos, bringing travelers to town with *ideas*. I think, if not the agent of chaos, it is the agent of dissolution and I am no longer sure that is a good thing.

I am thirty-five, and if life had gone as planned, I would be divorced nearly a year now. Instead, I am sixteen months widowed, and a man whom I like very much has moved in and wants to marry me. Sundays, I read the paper's travel section, and picture myself elsewhere, training to Punta Arenas or walking the dusty streets of Mombassa.

I once knew a woman who made twelve dollars an hour at a travel agency. She lived thriftily—no more than two pairs of underwear—and maintained three separate accounts for three future trips. She spent an entire dinner party explaining the math. I don't remember the details, but the idea was to have sequentially maturing funds, so that in Ecuador she imagined and planned her trip to Cairo, and in Cairo the following one to Irian Jaya.

It was an uncomfortable conversation. She talked loudly and I was embarrassed. I don't think she knew how strange it sounded that she lived stingily at home and was so rarely there. She moved and left no forwarding address. Lately, since my husband died, I find myself thinking of her.

I know the addiction of the road, the seduction of a high curving hill. I am drawn up those hills for the vista, for that everlasting promise of horizon, a fresh chance, a clean slate, all the clichés of starting over. It's the promise of the New World. It's Jack Kerouac and Rabbit Angstrom. And I think all of us Americans are susceptible.

I have met most of my boyfriends on the road—either they were leaving home or I was. Jeff was tall, red-haired, a taciturn journalist five years older than I. We met in Idaho, climbing the Sawtooth Mountains. I was eighteen.

Afterwards, I went home to Boston and waitressed for bad tips. We wore Raggedy Ann dresses and were trained to say, "Would you like that muffin hot and buttery?" which gave the young men who ate there plenty of opportunity for stupidity and whistles. I fled after two months and met Jeff at his mother's house in St. Cloud, Minnesota. We rented a car and drove straight to the Grand Canyon before he left for Minneapolis.

Some months later I met Mark in Portland, and though he had a lot of drawbacks—his shoulders were narrower than mine, he had a girlfriend back in New Zealand, and a mean streak he brought with him—he was imbued with a certain glamour by being foreign and on the road. I liked his sense of adventure. We were both hitching around the country, and by then I'd had some narrow escapes and was weary of traveling alone.

A trucker with sagging Bisquick-colored cheeks and flat eyes had offered me a ride out of New Mexico. I had gotten in because I'd been too long by the side of the road and it was night and twice now men in cars had hung leering out their windows and pitched beer bottles at me probably because I was a gringa.

The trucker, Mike, wore a leather belt with his name tooled in fat capitals, and offered to teach me to drive an eighteen-wheeler. "It has twenty-one gears," he said, and fondled the wooden knobs on each stick. "You can make a lot of money."

"I'll think about it," I said, looking straight through the windshield.

After a few hours I nodded off and jerked awake, nodded off and jerked awake. Mike kept one hand on the wheel and with the other he thumbed to the bed in the back of the cab. "I'm driving straight through," he said. "You wanta take the bed?" I hadn't slept the night before, and I thought I'd wake if he stopped the truck, so I squeezed between the seats and crawled in back. Sometime later I felt the mattress sag. He must have weighed three hundred pounds. He sighed and stretched out, laying there for a bit before edging closer. I felt his gut pressed against my back. His hand crawled down my shoulder, over my breast, and cupped me. I pretended sleep and rolled onto my stomach.

The next day he was angry. He dropped me off on a slow street in L.A. by a gas station where I stood for hours with my thumb out. It was hot. Occasionally, a shirtless mechanic looked out from under the hood and stared. It was very hot. At last, a man pulled over. "Get in," he said and I did. He wanted to know what I thought I was doing there. Didn't I know three people had been shot by that very gas station last week?

The trip went downhill from there. Another trucker told me I had pretty eyes, pulled over and tried to kiss me. I struggled, but he was stronger and faster. I had made a practice of memorizing license plates before accepting rides. It paid off now. I reeled off the number, lied and told him my father was a cop, my mother a lawyer, and he'd never get away with this.

He quit, at last. I wanted to get out. He wouldn't let me. He was remorseful now. He would make amends. He would drop me off at the Pea Soup Capitol of the World. He'd even pay for a bowl of the stuff. He stressed how good the soup was, that it was made with ham bones *and* ham chunks. This seemed to matter a great deal to him.

We pulled into the official Pea Soup Capitol restaurant parking lot. I swung down from the cab. "Look," he said, "I'm just a normal guy with a wife and two kids at home. Everyone's like this." This guy changed my affection for people. He did not change my affection for the road.

In the family mythology, my grandfather is the hero, partly because he was so good at leaving home. He took long driving trips across country sometimes with his children and sometimes without. Once, while driving alone, he picked up a hitchhiker in raggedy clothes. My grandfather was a gregarious and generous host and he took the poor fellow out to dinner. They exchanged stories and got to laughing and when they climbed back in the car, the man pulled a gun from his overcoat and said, "I was going to rob you, kill you, but you paid for my supper." And he put the gun away and quit his life of crime—or so the story goes. I'm not sure what lesson the grandchildren were supposed to draw from this story, but I took from it the belief that the road is good and transformative.

I think my whole family believes that. When life is difficult, our first resort is leaving home. My father left the midwest for east-coast schooling. My mother left the constraints of high society Baltimore for the constraints of Yankee Boston. And then my parents left each other. We leave for opportunity, perspective, escape. Leaving is what we know how to do.

After my father moved out (I was eight and my sister two), my mother didn't sleep well. Many days, she'd wake us before dawn. Silently, in nightgowns, we'd convert the station wagon's back into a double bed, propping our favorite pillows against the front seats and pulling a soft quilt under our chins. We watched the sunrise through the rear window. We drank Cokes when we were thirsty and ate M & M's and oranges when we were hungry. I've never felt safer.

Sometimes on a perfectly sunny weekday, when most moms made their children walk to school, my mother would call all my friends in every grade and offer them a ride in our red VW convertible with the top down. We'd ride standing up. Sometimes there'd be as many as a dozen kids packed in.

"Give me directions!" my mother shouted over the wind.

"Go left!" David yelled from the back. She yanked the wheel and veered for the Weiss's manicured lawn.

"Not yet! Go straight!"

She jerked the car straight and flung us shrieking into the seats.

These days when every child has a carseat and a bike helmet, she might sound flaky, but in the late 60s no one thought such things.

Once my mother drove my sister Xandria and me to Baltimore, where she borrowed her brother's van and picked up our cousin Serrin. We drove

on to Florida to see Apollo 11 blast off. We saw it, or the vapor trail, from a distant peninsula. I wasn't very impressed. But the next day we rode a roller coaster and Serrin threw up.

And then my mother tried to buy a cartful of groceries with an out-of-state check. Newly single and still a bit naive, she had brought just sixty dollars for four people on a week's trip. The clerk wouldn't take anything but cash. My mother turned crimson and backed the cart out of the cashier lane. Aisle by aisle we returned Pop-Tarts and Fritos and bacon and oranges and M & M's and peanut butter and cheese. At last we stared down into the near empty cart. Two loaves of forty-nine-cent white bread lay dented at the bottom. We were very quiet.

"Well," my mother said brightly, pivoting the cart, "let's start over," and she headed for the canned food aisle. When we caught up with her she was parked in front of columns of rectangular silver tins. Skinny black-eyed fish stared from the side of every can. Serrin and I looked at each other and back at the cans. "Everyone gets to choose their two favorites," my mother said gaily, and in a sing-songy voice listed the options for my little sister. "You can have sardines in ketchup or mustard or oil or water."

"Water," said Xandria. She refused to embellish the grim facts. Serrin and I held the opposite theory. We wanted our sardines smothered in ketchup and mustard. Mom chose oil. Oil, she thought, might increase the nutritional value. Pretty soon we had eight cans clattering along next to the bread, and by the time we lined up for the cashier the second time, everyone was giggling and claiming her sardines were really the best.

The trip back was just as good. We pulled over and watched three men in a culvert rope a croc's legs calf-style and throw him in a truck bed. He whammed his tail from side to side. The truck shook.

A little further north we saw a billboard advertising "Free Orange Juice, 59 miles." Fifty-nine miles in the wrong direction, but we didn't care. Eighteen times in the last six days, we'd lined bread slices with tiny black-eyed fish. I don't think I'll ever forget their crunchy bones and pewtery skin. We would have driven a hundred miles.

Mom drove and sang and described a counter full of tall glass pitchers filled with Florida's best, pulpiest, juiciest juice. Each of us, she said, could drink our fill. In the back of the van we sang too and played endless rounds of spit, slapping the cards giddily onto the seat. At the end, the signs promised more: gators, too.

The building was dim and made of concrete block. It did have a long counter—and a lady behind it, guarding a single pitcher. She set out four measly Dixie cups and poured them half-full. The alligators were caged in a sunken wading pool and no longer than my foot. But the lady took pity and gave us each a refill, and there was a terrific merry-go-round made of

three tricycles harnessed together in a circular track, which we rode til we were dizzy.

I've been driving lots of times since, but I've never liked a trip better than this one to Florida and back. It offered all the best of the road, plans going awry and accidental side trips turning out best.

Maybe I was looking for a little of that breezy serendipity when I went hitching with Mark. He lacked my mother's whimsy and flair but, as I said, he was a foreigner from New Zealand and he had worked nights in a slaughterhouse, earning money to come to America. Nightly in my tent, he imitated the exact pitch of a pig's death squeal. This seemed repulsive but interesting. It qualified as experience.

Days we stuck our thumbs out. That was my favorite part, the way the dimming of the lights is the best part of a play. I loved not knowing what would happen next, and we had some thrilling adventures. Once during a blizzard, a geologist picked us up in his truck and drove us west across Wolf Creek Pass. He told us of upthrusts and extrusions and slip-faults millennia old. Red rock steepled the sky and snow fell softly all around.

But most drivers were boring or lewd and all of them demanded entertainment. So we told stories, and when we tired of our true lives, I made things up. The tales didn't have to be remotely probable just exotic. I told one guy we were traveling all over the world collecting fabric for parachutes. We'd just come back from Sri Lanka, where they make a particularly rare silk. "Really?" the man said, eyes turning from the road to me. He wanted me to say yes, so I did.

At first, I loved inventing stories. No longer anchored by surname or address, I thought I could be anyone from anywhere—and like it. Then it was Christmas Eve and a dad picked us up. We camped in his backyard. Through the pup tent's triangular screen, we could see their lit-up living room window: the man stringing garlands of lights on the tree and his wife wrapping presents. We gorged on Pepperidge Farm triple-decker chocolate cake with chocolate icing and cheap red wine. We were very lonely.

Mark and I had been so long on the road without fixed identities and the attendant rules that we were lost. We ended our trip early, shortly after New Year's, in Seattle. We would meet again the following summer, but this time we would be disillusioned. His Thoreau riffs and my Swiss Army knife, we finally understood, were icons for the nomads we aspired to be rather than who we were.

When Sam and I split up, after ten years together, seven of them married, I craved the anonymity, the speed, and the control driving offers. In six months I put an extra 11,000 miles on my car. For that first year, home felt wrong.

Like my mother before me, I couldn't sleep. I too took to driving before dawn. In my memory, the drives always begin under a navy sky. I head west, up a hill so steep that most cars drop way below the speed limit long before the crest. I take the foothill at seventy-five and clear the peak at sixty. In the rearview mirror the sky lightens. Streaks of lime, mauve, violet float in a pale blue bowl. I follow the highway to the Berkshires. I like this road because it cuts through granite and swamp and neighborhoods with equal implacability. Along the way there are hairpin turns and overlooks and scenic wooden towers rising high into the sky. I do not get out of the car or even pull over. This trip is about moving not arriving. At the foothills I say, "Yep, there are the Berkshires," turn around and drive back.

I am a fan of highways. Which is another way of saying I'm a fan of America. I go where I want when I want to. Driving is what my mother did after Dad left. She drove and she suspended the rules. She stopped wearing a bra and going to church. She bought a bearskin rug and Marimekko pillows. She considered throwing out all the dining room furniture. She went to Greece and took us on lots of car trips including a camping trip to Nova Scotia and a month driving the coast of California.

And then some eight years after my father left, we had a bad winter and my mother's station wagon was dying and she just couldn't take it anymore. She ordered a VW convertible and a VW van. Whichever came first would determine our fate. If we got the bug, we'd stay home and our routines would continue. If the van came in first, she'd pull us out of school and we'd drive around the country for a year. "Travel," she said, "is a great education."

In the end neither car came in time. She went on a blind date with Saul, a man who took her to operas and played a wicked game of tennis. They were engaged after four months. They bought a Peugeot station wagon—between them they had five kids—and our new life began.

She gave away the bear rug, spruced up the dining room set, and bought four sets of good china. My remarried mother didn't drive us to Florida or Nova Scotia or north on Highway 1. I thought she'd made a terrible bargain. Now I think she traded the road for home.

Sam died of heart failure on Valentine's Day, and I cannot help but think it is no coincidence. I do not mean that he died for love of me, but simply that his heart failed him. He died fourteen days after the divorce papers arrived and fourteen days before his girlfriend, a good woman who loved him, expected an answer to her ultimatum: marry her or move out. She would have been his fourth wife, and I suspect he felt a moral failure. He may have thought his only option was the road, as it had been at the end of every other romantic relationship. They lived in upstate New York, a dismal place in

March. Maybe he thought of heading west, as he had talked about so often in the past. But he would have been starting over—again—without friends, and out of touch with most of his family.

Perhaps it seems odd to love a man who would come to abandon his mother. I do not know how to answer that charge, except by showing Sam's other side, his kindness and his constancy.

I fell in love with him because he had wise eye wrinkles, because he tipped waitresses generously, and nurtured the houseplants I neglected. I fell in love with him because he uncaged his canaries and built them a playground. It had swings and ladders and toys wired to sticks. And when I faced trouble, he said, "We'll get through this," and made me a gallon of potato soup.

Years later, sometime after we had separated, my teenage sister lay in the hospital for two months with a rare muscle condition. She fretted because it was October in New England and she did not know what color the leaves were. Sam heard of this. He walked into the woods and chose two maple leaves, one red and one flame-orange, and taped them to a file card. "SOME LEAVES LOOK LIKE THIS," he wrote, "AND SOME DO NOT." He had a way of steadying people.

At the funeral his mother said Sam had been considerate beyond his years. One summer she had four kids, a job and mono. Sam, the oldest, was eleven. He babysat all that long season and sometimes mopped the kitchen floor. "None of my other kids even noticed the floor was dirty," she said. We have tried to reconcile Sam's considerateness and cruelty. And we do not have an answer. All we are left with are the stories, his and ours.

I sometimes wonder if his standards were too high. And having loused up early—he married very young, divorced and left a son behind—he could never forgive himself. The road is where he went when things were bad, when he'd made a mess of things, and where he obliterated himself. I wonder sometimes if he chose the road for the same reasons I do: because it is fast and beautiful and rhythmic and anonymous and, for a while, you think you can be anyone from anywhere.

And then he couldn't be anyone from anywhere. He was Sam Genet, who would be divorced a third time, and who would leave another woman who loved him, and if the past were any indicator, he would go on the road, and I think his heart just gave out.

At the wake, his sister tucked a corner of the last page of *On the Road* in Sam's pocket, a book he had given her years ago. I thought it a brave gift. It seemed in some way to honor and forgive Sam for his silence and his leavings. At the funeral, I learned things I had not known before. A pattern emerged. The silence and distance he had imposed between us, I learned,

were not unusual. And it did not mean, as I supposed it had, that he did not forgive me. It seemed he did not forgive himself.

He had told his girlfriend all manner of stories about us, including one about a birthday canoe trip we'd taken down the Concord River. It was August and humid. Purple loosestrife bloomed on the shore. The water looked soft and dark. He had told his girlfriend we'd like each other. And we did. She was honest and brave and kind.

We divided his ashes four ways, among his son, his mother, his girlfriend and me. This division depressed me. But his son thinks it fitting. Maybe he's right. It is the truth about Sam. He was all over the map. This winter, a year after his death, I put his ashes in Walden Pond, as he had requested, and have found great comfort there. I know where he is at last.

Leaving doesn't come so easy now, just the restlessness. For weeks after Sam died, I'd wake on blue-sky mornings and picture driving all the way to the Pacific. Or maybe around Texas I'd change my mind, hook a left and head for Central America. I wouldn't take much, just the change in the ashtray and whatever maps lay in the glove compartment. But I didn't go.

At night when I couldn't sleep I read nineteenth-century travel accounts by women of independent means. I'd pull out an atlas, look up Africa and trace a path across the Sahara from Morocco through Mauritania, Mali and into Niger. Sometimes I'd get up, pack a small bag, leave a couple days worth of food for the cats and get in the car. I'd sit there, keys in the ignition, for fifteen minutes or more before going back to bed.

Sam's death changed how I felt about leaving. When I look at the photos taken just before he died, I see his face had changed. It had gone slack and watery. I think his itinerant life was catching up with him. I think he was dissolving.

Still, I keep an atlas in my study, a map of the States in my bedroom, and a book on Africa on my coffee table. I am addicted to the possibility of leaving. This worries my boyfriend. On our third date, Nick hefted the Africa book as if weighing it: "Leave a lot?"

"Try to," I said.

A month or two later, in a catalogue, I saw a couple of round leather suitcases, one nested inside the other—the kind Grace Kelly or Audrey Hepburn might have carried. They conjured all the glamour of leaving: a train platform, a fluttering scarf. I ordered them as an inoculation against staying and Nick.

They didn't work, of course. They're heavy and too small to be useful. And Nick's still here. For a while I stood them in the corner of the living room. But they've faded, as souvenirs do.

I don't know whether, as travelers, Mark or Jeff or Sam, my mother or

I brought ideas to town. I don't know if we disturbed the lives of residents. Did the dad who let us camp in his backyard long to leave? Did the stingy juice lady grow more generous? I don't know the road from the resident perspective. I know it as traveler.

I know that it magnetizes the unattached and, for people too long on the road, it can dissolve the bonds of community and family. J. B. Jackson, the landscape historian, devoted a whole book to the subject of roads, cars, and the consequent loss of neighborhood. He wrote, we're a bit lost now, but we'll reorient, find a way to create stability independent of landscape. I think he was way too optimistic.

He asks late in the book, "Which do we value more, a sense of place or a sense of freedom?" I'm living on the edge of that question right now. I don't have an answer. Nick still lives here, I keep reading the travel section, the round suitcases sit dusty in the closet and I haven't left yet.