

---Traveling the---
-----Two-Lane-----

a memoir and travelogue

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PROLOGUE

Bedside

My father stared at the hospital ceiling, unseeing. His jaw hung open as his lungs labored to move air in and out, the sound from obstructed passages like the raspy escape of air from a broken bicycle pump—the struggle apparent on his unconscious face.

We stood around his bed: Mom, me, and most of the family. More were on the way. With trembling fingers, my tiny mother traced the wrinkles on Dad's forehead, her mouth set and unmoving. This vigil seemed to go on forever, broken only by a trip to the bathroom, a dry sandwich from a machine, or a visitor from the hushed halls.

A tech in a white jacket and pants came in to manipulate the IV and other tubes that journeyed to various places inside my father. A few nurses came in, stood at the foot of the bed, and asked if we wanted to pray. We joined them in a hand-holding circle as they prayed Jesus would care for my Jewish father.

We didn't correct them. Prayer is prayer.

A doctor entered, his white coat unbuttoned, deep vertical furrows between his eyes. I asked if our father was in pain.

“We don’t think so,” he said.

“Does he know we’re here?” my brother Jeff asked.

“Act like he does,” he said, sounding like a recording. He spent more time looking at Dad’s charts than at us. “Help him to know it’s okay for him to leave you. It’ll help him know you’ll be fine without him. Then he can let go.”

My sister Donna looked at the doctor. “Is there anything you can do to speed this up? If he’s aware, then he’s suffering. It must be unbearable.”

“No. Sorry.”

And then he was gone. The doctor, not Dad. It would be a full day and night before the hideous wheezing ended.

The last day was a fitting end to the cheerless years that had gone before. Five years earlier, Dad drove past the end of the parking space and bumped into the Florida condo where he lived with my mother. That’s when Mom took his car keys, replacing them with keys to their storage locker. When he tried to open the driver’s door, he turned to her with a troubled expression and said, “Mom, there’s something wrong with the lock.”

She said, “Here, let me try.” And then, when the door opened, she added, “I might as well drive. I’m already here.”

Sometimes, when he took out the trash, he stood on the balcony wondering what he was supposed to do with the bag in his hand. But he could still talk, feed himself, and hug me with his well-muscled arms.

One day, he thought he had left his store unlocked.

He’d had stores—hardware, furniture, and appliance stores—but they had been in Chicago where I grew up, and were now long gone. He was agitated and couldn’t relax. So, they left for “the store.” Mom told him she couldn’t remember where it was, asking him where to turn and following his directions until he forgot why they were out and asked for an ice cream cone.

Every time I visited them in Florida, some other part of him had disappeared or deteriorated. Before I left, I would just be getting used to this new dad. But the next time, something else would have vanished—until only his warm hug remained.

When he lay in his casket, my mom bent slowly—every muscle shaking—and kissed his cold, waxy forehead.

After the funeral, we bought Mom a new set of luggage, hoping she would travel. A few months later, I invited her to visit me in Atlanta, offering to go to Florida and fly back with her.

“No, darling, I’ll be fine. I really don’t need help to take a plane trip.”

I fidgeted in my Atlanta office, watching my desk clock, anxious to pick her up and show her a good time. I jumped when the phone rang. Donna, my sister in Chicago, told me an airline employee phoned her. Mom had taken an earlier plane. When she arrived in Atlanta and no one was there to meet her, she found an attendant and said she was visiting her daughter in Chicago. So the attendant phoned Donna.

My heart pounded all the way to the airport, but I didn’t get it yet. Nor did I understand the problem when my read-a-book-a-week mother asked me if she should spell *forty* with a “u.” And it still didn’t register when my friend Carol dropped us off at the Kiss-Ride stop at the transit station and Mom whispered, seriously asking me if she should kiss the driver.

After she returned to Florida, her neighbor called to tell me Mom was behaving strangely. She wouldn’t agree to go out with friends and rarely left the house. When someone came to visit, she abruptly asked them to leave—unlike her usual self. Her friends were deeply concerned.

Only then did I understand the severity.

That’s when she moved to an independent apartment in an assisted-living home. Her new life had begun, but not as we imagined. After caring for my father for five years, we hoped she would have some joy. Instead, my sweet, hardworking mother had begun to die—as she would for the next five years, just like my dad—a little bit at a time.

And I never told them my truth.



CHAPTER 1

How It Began

I sat fuming at a red light, waiting in a long line of cars, each green pulse freeing only a few. Inching toward my turn, with nothing better to occupy my mind, I asked myself how much longer I would inch through life. I was sixty-three; how many years did I have left? Would I follow in the path of my late parents, vitality slithering away in small, humiliating episodes, losing the ability to care for myself?

At that stuck-in-traffic moment, I decided to do something wonderful, something fantastic—now—while physically and cognitively intact. When I arrived at my office, I wrote a letter resigning my post-retirement job.

A few years earlier, I retired from a full career in academia, research, and health care and had taken a position as director of a Jewish-sponsored lesbian and gay help center. I liked my new job, but the fantasy of wandering far from home had been simmering in my still-fertile gray matter. I imagined driving up mountains, camping on

lakes, shopping in quirky towns. Now, by damn, I would do it, alone, for at least a year—maybe eighteen months.

My friends thought I was crazy. “You’re past sixty,” said one. “And you’re not even five feet tall. You’ll be a target for any badass out there.”

“Road kill,” said another.

They feared I’d be lost more often than not. The ones who weren’t confronting me directly muttered behind my back. “Think of it as thirty-six two-week vacations strung together,” I suggested to my dubious friends while I returned to my plans.

Mom and Dad had encouraged independence and exploration, so unlike my newer friends, Donna and my brother Jeff were accustomed to my need for movement and adventure. They did, however, express concern for my safety. Life is short; the idea of this journey was fascinating. I would take reasonable care and enjoy every minute.

Where to go? What kind of vehicle? What to take? How to communicate with friends and family? How to find good tenants to care for my house?

Hunting for answers distracted me from fears of hereditary dementia.

The first question was easy. I’d always wanted to go to Alaska, land of *National Geographic* majesty. But how would I find my way? I could get around in flat cities laid out on a grid, but I lived in hilly Atlanta, where streets crossed each other more than once, sixty of them were called Peachtree, and I often felt like a rat running a maze with the promised cheese forever out of sight. I have considerable skill as a map reader and I’m good at left versus right and up versus down, but not every road is on the map. Besides, it’s too hard to read a map while driving.

It was 2003. Navigation systems were just coming to the market. They were expensive in those early years, but how terrific it would be to have an invisible guiding voice. The first one I looked at operated with a computer under the driver’s seat . . . twenty-one hundred dollars. Two months later, when I went back to buy it, a much better model was available. No computer under the seat, just a screen to be mounted

on the dashboard and antennae to be wired from the screen to the hood of the vehicle. Price was now only thirteen hundred dollars.

So much progress in such a short time. I could never guess what would come in the near future. I bought it, had it installed, and got acquainted long before I left home.

As soon as I pushed the ON button, a map appeared on its screen and a woman spoke: "Proceed to the highlighted route. Then the route guidance will start."

Her voice was more like a news commentator than a computer—I was enchanted. She became my partner, my beloved companion, helping so much more than I could have imagined. When I was low on gas, she found the nearest station; when I wanted a book, she located the closest library.

When she said, "Take the next right turn—on Piedmont Avenue," and I was stuck in the left lane, I disobeyed and wondered what to do now that I was off-route. She knew I had not obeyed, but said, in a nonthreatening tone, "Recalculating . . ." and then displayed a new path. On the suggestion of my witty friend Lesley, I named her Mazie Grace—*I once was lost, but now am found.*

Deciding on the right kind of vehicle was more complex. I planned to stay in campgrounds more than hotels—more adventure and less expense—so I needed a vehicle big enough to live in. I went to RV centers, where salesmen showed me how to pull tubes and wires from hidden panels to set up for the night and how to put them all back when it was time to leave. I lifted my short legs onto tall steps to enter the driver's seat and wished for something smaller—a new VW Eurovan. Designed for weekend camping, it was the largest vehicle I could tolerate driving and the smallest home I could consider.

I selected an attractive silver gray, but the Eurovan was boxy—definitely not a sexy car.

All rear seats had to go—the rear-facing bench and one more forward facing—leaving only the two front passenger seats and a space five feet wide by eight feet long. I drew pictures of the van's interior, minus the rear seats I would remove to make room for a built-in bed, five feet by three. Then I cut pieces of cardboard to represent the bed, tiny fridge,

dresser drawers, microwave, and porta-potty. Moving the pieces around the drawing, I found a place for each necessity. My friend Wade built a wooden base for a six-inch deep, foam-rubber mattress, cutting both to fit in the rear of the van. A small fold-out table held a desk lamp, an electric heater, and petite fan, each item velcroed to the table so I could drive without fear of projectiles. I put a miniature refrigerator under the table and a dresser against the front seat, drawers facing back for easy access. A microwave sat on top of the dresser. All this left a space just large enough for me to access everything I needed. Had I been any taller—or wider—I would not have fit in my tiny traveling home. I believed TV was essential. I found a fellow who installs them in limousines and asked him if he could do the same thing in my VW van.

“Yes,” he said, “you can get local stations and you can use it for DVDs.” Oh boy, oh boy! But after installation, I learned it totally depleted the car’s battery in two hours unless the motor was running. And it rarely got a signal outside the city. It would have been great for kids to watch movies while mom drove, but I didn’t have kids or family to entertain and had no wish to use it while on the road. I never used the TV, not even once.

I was long past the age where I could sleep all night without waking to pee, and I couldn’t imagine creeping through unfamiliar paths in the rain or cold with a roll of paper in one hand and a flashlight in the other, perhaps slogging through mud in search of the communal bathroom. I wanted a system like they have in space where urine is processed to be used for drinking and washing while solid waste is burned when it re-enters our atmosphere. A toilet was a necessity, but what kind? The first one I found incinerated the waste—but it was over two thousand dollars.

Disappointed, but undaunted, I continued hunting for a solution to the middle-of-the-night problem. The answer was a simple, plastic contraption that folded up and looked like a briefcase. At night, I pulled the legs down, opened the top and exposed a seat and a mesh sack that held a disposable, biodegradable bag. At less than a hundred

dollars, it always reminded me that the best purchase I *didn't* make was a waste-incinerating toilet.

Though sometimes the journey seemed far in the future, somewhat imaginary, I worked like an automaton, mindlessly performing computer-driven instructions until the house was empty, clean, and airy. As the work progressed, the trip left the realm of fantasy. It would happen! And as it became a reality, friends and family again expressed concern. How would they know where I was? How would I stay in touch? Smart phones didn't exist and calls were expensive, but I had a cell phone and laptop. Though Wi-Fi was new technology, it was rapidly becoming available at campgrounds and coffee shops, making it possible for me to describe my adventures in emails. I promised to be a regular correspondent.

I began to look for a renter. My friend Wendy, who owned rental property, taught me how to pre-check potential occupants for criminal records. Her partner, Cindy, offered to manage the property during my journey. Their contributions were essential to the rental process. After criminal background checks, I interviewed a promising couple who said they were a real estate agent and an artist. A quick Internet check indicated they were three months behind in their current rent. Another couple had used multiple social security numbers in several states, and the next pair had two bankruptcies and pages of unpaid debts. One bankruptcy and fewer debts would have been okay, but I'd have been a fool to rent to someone with so many unpaid obligations. But there were many callers; it took less than ten days to find appropriate renters.

The experience of meeting people with fake résumés was a good reminder: people can't always be trusted, and I was about to meet quite a few strangers.

Friends were still afraid for me and continued to give me instructions. Family, though not as fearful, added more advice. *Get an alarm for your car. Fill the tank when you hit half-full. Check your tires every time you get gas. Carry a spare battery. Keep a spare car key. Call me daily.* All of this advice—except “call me daily”—was valuable.

After months of preparation, it was time to go. Having abandoned my home, pots and pans, sofas, and bathtubs, I was transformed into a wanderer who lived in a van.

A few miles from home, I put a CD in the player. The music was a parting gift from Florence, one of the few friends who wasn't worried about me. The lyrics were fitting:

It's been a long road, getting from there to here.
It's been a long time, but my time is finally near.
And I will see my dream come alive at last, I will touch the sky.
And they're not gonna hold me down no more,
No they're not gonna change my mind . . .

—ENTERPRISE (Star Trek) Soundtrack Lyrics
Where My Heart Will Take Me