

One



“You’re *leaving*.” It was an accusation.

My daughter, Danielle, stood framed in the doorway of her guest bedroom, a hand braced on her pantsuit-clad hip and her brow drawn in a tight squint of a frown. It wasn’t like her, but she returned home early from her job as a reference librarian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and caught me red-handed. I was stuffing a zip-it plastic bag with my toothbrush and cosmetics into the side pocket of the canvas suitcase sitting wide-open on the bed, already full to bulging.

Keep packing. It was that, or confront the hurt and confusion in my daughter’s eyes.

My heart ached as I realized it could have been her father standing there in front of me. That tight mop of sandy curls, perpetual Mediterranean tan and intense brown eyes came straight from Dan. But then she was her daddy’s girl in so many ways—even that instinct to protect those she loved, as her father had the whole of our life together.

Forty-two years. We would have been married forty-two years last spring, the month Dan died. Yet here I was, walking away from my closest flesh-and-blood ties to those memories, propelling myself into the unknown when everything in me cried out to hold on.

“I’m sixty-three going on sixty-four and your Dad wouldn’t have wanted me to live like this,” I said, quietly zipping shut the suitcase flap. “I’ve decided it’s time.”

“When did . . . what are you going to do, where are you going to

go?” Danielle’s frown deepened. “Mom, you don’t even have car or a roof over your head to—”

“You forget . . . I *do*. It’s sitting, has been for a year now, on that RV pad in northern Michigan.”

One small hitch—among other things, the rig was exposed to a brutal upper Midwest winter, without my lifting a finger to protect it. I hadn’t allowed myself to dwell on what that could mean. For a split-second, Dan’s graphic tales of burst pipes and rodents feasting on electrical wiring surfaced in my memory. The road atlas tallied a hundred-plus miles between Sault St. Marie and that campground, much of it sparsely inhabited wilderness with nary a RV repair facility in sight. I could wind up in the middle of nowhere without heat, water or sanitary facilities and with nowhere to go to remedy the situation.

“The *motor home*?” Alarm resonated in my daughter’s voice. “Surely you can’t mean that. Daddy was always the one who drove, took care of the repairs. What if you break down on the road somewhere?”

“So, I’ll learn,” I winced, well aware of how little I knew. “I’m going to fly to the Soo and have arranged for a driver to get me to the campground. If I can’t handle the rig, then I’ll hire somebody to teach me, if I have to.”

Danielle was looking at me with total incomprehension, as if suddenly I had displayed unmistakable signs of dementia. As my eldest, she somehow felt personally responsible to figure out whether to have me committed.

“Mom, it’s been so wonderful having you live here. How on earth will we explain this to the kids? It would make the most sense if you would just . . . ,” she took a deep breath and came straight out with it, “just *sell* the darn thing.”

My mouth felt stiff. “This comes as a shock and I’m sorry for that. I should have told you up front what I was thinking, but I wanted to be sure first, didn’t want to seem ungrateful for all you’ve—”

“You want a place of your own, is that it? Chris and I would be happy to help you find something. Meantime our friend has a great

apartment for rent. You can find a car, still travel if that's what you want, but in motels where you're really safe and comfortable, not all alone in that . . . humongous thing—”

It kept coming back to that. “This is my life, honey, and I need to live it. Your dad and I spent some of the happiest days of our lives in that *humongous thing* . . . !”

My voice trailed off on a rising note. The decibel level shocked the both of us into silence.



It wasn't supposed to turn out this way. My husband's dream wasn't a bad one. We would sell our money-pit of a family home, sink a chunk of the profits into a motor home and head wherever the compass or our instincts took us. Together, we had refined this blueprint for a good twenty years before our retirement.

We often laughed at the irony of it, Dan and I. Travel was our business, yet through all those years of marriage, sharing exotic junkets was not an agenda item in either one of our Day Planners.

Eight to five, Dan was racking up frequent flyer miles for an international engineering consulting firm with offices in Lansing and Detroit. I juggled motherhood and a career creating adventures to far away places for my clients as manager of a downstate Michigan travel agency. After hours, I calculated progress by miles on the odometer chauffeuring our children to lessons and soccer practice and play tryouts, usually on my own.

Children grow. Still, even with both Danielle and her brother, David, married and shepherding families of their own, Dan and I slogged away at our respective callings, no end in sight. Fate intervened. My husband turned sixty-two and I was pushing fifty-nine.

“Pack your duds, kiddo!” Dan called out, all nervous energy as he walked into the living room, headed my way.

I looked at my watch—nine PM. My husband had driven crack-

of-dawn from our home outside of East Lansing to Detroit for a pow-wow with the powers that be. At something in his voice, I felt a knot tightening in my chest, immediately wary.

“A year’s severance, payout for overtime and combat pay,” he said. “We’re out of here.”

You’re kidding, the words were on the tip of my tongue, but I drew a long, steadying breath instead. He wasn’t kidding. One look at his face made that plain enough.

“Oh, Dan . . .”

He just shrugged. Squaring his shoulders, he tossed the briefcase on the floor inside the doorway and joined me on the loveseat.

“C’est la vie,” he said, taking my two hands in his. “Your boss keeps talking about selling the travel agency anyway. I surfed on-line over lunch. Sixteen RVs are listed around here, from camping vans to major bus conversions. What say, Saturday morning we check ‘em out?”

It happened just that fast. By close of business Monday we had put our family home on the market, the proud owners of a used thirty-four-foot-long motor home, our very own efficiency apartment on wheels. For two glorious years we lived out our fantasy on the road from one coast to the other and back again.

Ours was relatively modest as motor homes go. No slideouts. No toy haulers, not even a tow-vehicle hitched on behind. Still, whenever it was my turn at the helm, I sat there in white-knuckled terror as if about to move a 747 down the runway. Dan was lovingly amused.

The deal was supposed to be one hour for me at the helm for his every three. More often than not, Dan took pity on me and relieved me at the next rest area.

“Nothing to it, kiddo. Just think of it as a big van. You’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah sure,” I grumbled, “when pigs fly!”

My road *angst* aside, life was good. Dan never tired of puttering and inventing new ways of making our home-on-the-road just that—a home. I nested happily in that cozy space, wrote, sketched, turned ready-

to-eat meals into gourmet feasts.

Random geography defined our journey. Greedy for new memories, we clambered through pre-historic mound villages along the Mississippi and trudged along heat-baked pioneer wagon ruts in Wyoming. The rarified heights of Mount Evans in the Rockies beckoned, then the searing flats of Death Valley. Mirror-still glacial lakes in New Hampshire offered a respite after the sun-baked trek east across the farmlands of Canada.

As the months passed, I happily stuck multi-colored peel-and-stick shapes on a large map of the U.S. mounted on the inside of our RV door. Our life journeys, it turns out, are far more elusive to track.

We were bunking temporarily with our daughter and her family in Wisconsin when Dan had his first mini-stroke—within minutes of a major medical center. Their carefully regulated medications gave us another twelve months before the massive clot that ended it all.

The day was balmy, unusually warm for mid-May. We had settled in at a blip-on-the-screen private campground in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, just across the highway from that vast expanse of water we loved so much—Michigan, the “Great Lake”, from the Ojibwe *misshikama*, the storied shining waters of Hemingway and Longfellow, the fabled Third Coast.

We had courted, then honeymooned along Michigan's vast beaches and stony shorelines. A lifetime later, from the window in the motor home kitchen where I was making dinner, I watched my husband standing in the deserted picnic area of the campground, enjoying the last of the sunset. I remember thinking how beautiful those dark layers of clouds looked against the pale orange and teal of the sky.

And then I was on the cell phone dialing 911, frantic, stumbling through the wet grass toward where I saw Dan fall. Cradling his head in my lap, halfway from nowhere, I waited what seemed like forever, straining for the sound of sirens.

Mercifully, the EMTs let me ride along in the ambulance on that black and starless spring night—watching my husband's life slip away

as the asphalt stretched out ahead of us into the unknown. *Alone*. I had never felt so utterly alone.

“Of course, you’ve got to stay with family,” struggling with her own grief, Danielle took charge, had it all planned. “You can spend summers with me in Wisconsin, then stay with my brother in California when the weather gets snowy and cold.”

With no obvious course of action to fall back on, I didn’t protest. The months that followed were a blur of tears and deferred decisions. In the back of the ambulance on that rain-slick highway, my heart had ceased to feel and nothing, it seems, could revive it ever again.

We had agreed, Dan and I, when the time came, for our ashes to be scattered over Lake Michigan. A month after he died, with my family around me on an isolated promontory half-way up the Door County Peninsula, I forced myself to honor that part of my bargain.

The sky that day looked surreal, a cloudless, garish acrylic blue. My son and son-in-law read from Tagore and T.S. Eliot, Daniel’s favorite authors, heart-searing passages about undying love and the dark night of the soul. Dry-eyed and shivering in my trench coat in the cutting wind, I watched my dreams vanish like trails of smoke over the sun-drenched water.

Our motor home was not on my radar. It stood abandoned where I had left it in that campground on the Upper Peninsula. Instead, as a widow without a permanent mailing address, for the next twelve months I fought my grief and depression shuttling from airport to airport and child to child, from Wisconsin to the California high desert.

This was a journey of another sort—a terrible detour without visible signs of ending. Through those bleak and awful days, my children Danielle and David and their families were kind, patiently indulgent toward that shadow of a woman haunting their guest rooms for weeks and months at a time. Time passed.

And then I awoke one ordinary spring morning shaking and pale, unsteady on my feet, as if having survived a high fever. It would soon be May again. Dan had been dead almost a year.

As I stared into the mirror in my daughter Danielle’s guest room, I saw something that had not been there in all those intervening months. It was a desperate resolve to begin anew.

Against all odds, I saw evidence that I could yet reclaim all that vanished muscle tone from a year without regular workouts. My hair, though graying, still retained more than hints of the chestnut brown of younger days. The tracery of lines that bracketed my hazel eyes testified to remembered laughter as well as pain. While my heart felt ancient and scarred, there was a flicker of something akin to hope in that sad twist of a smile, hope I had thought was gone forever.

With my daughter safely off at work, I spent the better part of two weeks on-line googling resources for women RVing alone, then another making follow-up phone calls. I still couldn’t bring myself to tell Danielle, quietly grateful she wasn’t home to question the priority-mail printed matter arriving on almost a daily basis.

I hooked up with a chat group for single RVers. There seemed no point in postponing things any longer. This time after Danielle left for work, I rummaged through the attic for my suitcases.



And so here we stood, my daughter and I. Her face began to crumple and she looked away.

“Mom . . . I’m sorry, but this is *so wrong*.”

I cleared my throat, tried to soften my tone. “Honey, I know you’re worried, truly I do. But please try to understand. I would never forgive myself if I just forgot or shelved all those dreams your dad and I had without even trying to . . .”

Words failed. I had no idea what I was trying to do, just knew that I had to do it—something, anything but curl up and die, dependent on others for some sense of purpose and direction.

“I wish you would reconsider, give it time,” Danielle said slowly, “make sure this isn’t just some—”

“Some crazy Zen throwback thing, reclaiming my lost youth on the back of a Harley,” I finished for her.

“More or less, it had occurred to me.”

Inwardly I cringed, but managed to keep my tone light. “I came of age in the sixties, remember—have no desire to get back in a pup tent. A motor home isn’t exactly roughing it. Plenty of creature comforts, just not an awful lot of room. I lived in the rig for almost three years, after all.”

Danielle exhaled sharply. Small victory, I sensed that the steam was going out of her arguments.

“Well, at least let Chris, the kids and me drive you up there,” she insisted, “help you get settled. We’ve got a long weekend coming up and Chris can be pretty handy—not like Daddy, but with the small stuff anyway. You and I and the kids can wash and wax the outside, get the interior shipshape again.”

I didn’t dare cave in now or she would pounce on it, in a heartbeat. “Thanks,” I said. “Really . . . thanks, honey. But, no, this is something I have to do.”

Alone. That word kept cropping up again and again in my head. I didn’t allow myself to say it.

I had been a travel agent, for crying out loud. If I couldn’t even get myself from Point A in Madison to that campground and tackle what may or may not have happened to my home-on-wheels in my absence, how on earth could I ever take that beast out on the road. Besides, if I truly was going to do this, there was no time like the present to start.

My daughter was rigid in my arms as I hugged her. I persisted anyway, wishing so very badly that she could bring herself to understand.

“Honey, honey, I love you so very much,” I whispered. “And believe me, I appreciate what you’ve done, what you’re trying to do—”

“*But . . .?*”

I looked at her, managed a weak smile. “*But . . . I’m going.*”



I went. At the moment of truth at the airport, I found myself battling tears as my daughter hugged me, with a silent urgency, as if both our lives depended on it.

On the map the puddle-jumper flights across Lake Michigan seemed like a straight shot. In real time, the trip quickly deteriorated into a maze of hubs and plane changes, threats of flight delays as thunderstorms moved through the region.

When the limo service didn't show up at the airport in Sault St. Marie, against my better judgment, I chose to trust on-the-spot Owen and his older model mini-van. My driver had wanted to see his cash in advance. I quickly discovered why.

Curbside outside the Soo terminal, Owen tossed my three suitcases quickly into the cargo area and shoe-horned himself behind the wheel before I caught the unmistakable whiff of alcohol. Warning lights started to do their little whirling dance in my head.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" I hesitated. "It's not too late to leave me at the nearest bus stop."

Owen just chuckled, turned the key in the ignition. "Could'a used another hour or two of sack time, but ya gotta know, it takes one heck of a lot to stop old Owen. I ain't lost one yet!"

Primitive as sobriety tests go, but at least I didn't see evidence of any open containers. It half-occurred to me to offer to drive myself and let the guy sleep it off in the back. At least whatever Owen's limitations as a chauffeur, speeding wasn't one of them.

He had help there. Something seemed to be wrong with the engine. We rarely hit more than fifty miles an hour unless we were heading downhill, unlikely on Route 2. Except for a few stretches of rolling dunes out of St. Ignace, the terrain flattened out and the chill waters came to what seemed like feet from the road, separated only by narrow strips of sandy beach struggling to survive the gales that battered them on a regular basis.

I began to appreciate just how vulnerable and exposed those lonely little beaches felt. Tightening my death-grip on the shoulder belt

with one hand, I clutched the wad of bills to pay for the trip with the other, too queasy from the movement of the van to lean down and stash them in my wallet.

“So, whatcha doin’ then way out here by yerself anyway, Lady?” Owen shot a gap-toothed grin in my direction.

Good question. “I’m picking up my motor home, at the Northern Lights campground, west of St. Ignace.”

At the start of our little junket, I had handed my driver a locator map for Northern Lights that I had pulled off the campground’s website. Unfortunately, that useful bit of knowledge disappeared almost immediately into the morass of empty soda bottles and crumpled fast-food wrappers on the floor under and around the front seat.

“Wouldn’t have pegged ya as the campin’ type,” Owen persisted. “Them suitcases of yours look more like a cruise or somethin’.”

“Travel agency. I used to work for one. The luggage was a retirement present.” It seemed prudent to minimize Owen’s distractions. “Is traffic always this heavy?”

“Not to worry. Ya just settle back, Little Lady, and enjoy the ride.”

Not likely. Still, I took his advice, closed my eyes and leaned my temple against the cool glass of the car window, a great cure for headaches.

“Wake me, will you,” I said, “when we get close.”

“Gotcha, Lady.”

Maybe my daughter, Danielle, was right—this is nuts. A little late, I admitted, to come to that conclusion. Right now I wasn’t in the mood for I-told-you-so’s.

Somewhere in my half-sleep and half-waking state as the van lurched its way along the lakeshore, it occurred to me that I had not been this utterly on my own since I headed off to college, my freshman year at MSU. I hadn’t thought about it in ages, how utterly forlorn and abandoned I felt sitting on the bunk in that dorm room as I listened to the sound of my parents’ footfalls retreating down the cinder block and tile

hallway.

I had never been away from home before, but then my four suite-mates and I had bonded quickly, friendships that held for the duration of our college years, even beyond. Within less than a year of graduation, I had married. Through those and all the later changes of my life, other human beings—my family, neighbors, bosses and co-workers—had defined the parameters of my world.

Wherever this Kerouac-ian journey ahead of me was leading, it was turning out to be a leap of faith beyond my wildest imaginings. The terrain was unfamiliar. Words like unsettling, frightening, exhilarating churned in my head—that, and the prospect of change on a scale almost beyond comprehension, not just out there somewhere, but within myself.

For starters, I was older now. I couldn't even fathom how much I needed to learn to survive, much less how I was going to learn it. Exhausted, alternately tearful and resolute, in spite of myself, I must have dozed off.

A crunching of gravel and Owen's hearty, "We made it!" woke me with a start. Disoriented and stiff from bracing myself against the door for much of the trip, I straightened as best I could.

"Northern Lights?"

"A-yup! Shaved a good ten minutes off the trip."

In the back of my mind were wild tales of tourists falling to their knees as they made landfall after a rough cruise. The mini-van had shuddered to a stop in front of a pre-fab double-wide—newly renovated, from the look of it, with cedar shakes and wedgewood blue shutters.

I stumbled out of the back seat and uncurled my crumpled handful of cash, prepared to thrust it in the driver's direction. The bills were sweaty, limp after my multi-hour strangle-hold, but Owen just grinned and pocketed the roll.

Apparently the trip had succeeded in sobering him up. The guy had the look of someone about to hit the head and the nearest watering hole, in roughly that order.

"Good luck to ya, Lady!" he tipped the brim of his wear-stained

ball hat.

“You, too.”

“If yer ever goin’ that way again—back to Soo country—and need a lift, old Owen’s your man . . .!”

For the life of me I couldn’t think of a response as he slid behind the wheel of his shuttle. Belching fumes from the tailpipe, the mini-van rattled its way back on to the highway from whence we had come.

Alone with my high-end suitcases, I just stood there on that concrete slab outside the campground office. The place seemed way too quiet. I thought I felt a rain drop, but chalked it up to cold sweat thinking about what state my RV might be in.

“Register Here”, the sign on the office door said. I cracked the screen and went inside.

The luggage would be safe enough out on the slab for the moment. On solid ground. As for me, I wasn’t quite so sure.

