

THE ROADS WE TRAVEL

By Lynne Golodner

~Memoir~

To be a religious Jew, one must pretend the outside world does not exist: burrow into a home infused with the scent of baking bread, meat and potatoes bubbling in a pot, husband and wife in separate beds, lights set to timers. In that structured life, everything focuses on the Sabbath. The days before are devoted to planning and cooking and phone call invitations for celebratory meals, the days after filled with leftovers and cleaning. Husbands are commanded to satisfy their wives on the Sabbath. There are rules for everything: how and when to pray, which foods to eat and which to avoid, how much skin women can reveal (skirts four inches below the knee, sleeves past the elbow, clavicle covered), to shun clothing that mixes wool and linen. Married women hide their hair and never sing in front of men. The rabbis say the rules make it easier to reach God.

For the 10 years I lived in that world, I thought it was God I was reaching for.

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With you, I wanted to abandon everything and drive, to love the meandering, adopt your freedom to just go. But you drove most of our miles while I dozed in the passenger seat.

Our love began when you parked your brown sedan in my driveway, and I took you to the mall to buy clothes you'd never wear. To please me, you bought pleated trousers and shiny button-downs, but in my memory, you're always wearing the frayed khakis, and I hate that I tried to change you.

You were the oldest person at the Dave Matthews concert in that big arena with its dirt floor and folding chairs. As Tim Reynolds played his saxophone, I closed my eyes and leaned my head back, your hand on my neck, your body shadowing mine, moving with the music. After, in my bed, night air sifting through the window screen, we took it slow. It sort of scared me, all your years lived when I was just beginning, your eclectic string of jobs perfect for a book cover bio: gas station attendant, harvesting farmhand, fisherman off the coast of Nova Scotia, journalist on three continents. You were in the process of divorcing a Jewish woman who wore long skirts and had soft curly hair, a lot like me, only I was 18 years younger. With me, you could pretend you were just beginning.

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I need maps and directions, a destination, a purpose. I look for the quickest route between two places. Get me there sooner, faster. The journey cannot be my destination.

A drive from Seattle to Washington, D.C., bisects mountains and meadows on open stretches of highway. I knew someone once who traveled that route by bicycle just to see if he could. It took the whole summer, and he ended the trip exhausted and content, young and yearning. In a way, I could relate.

My first taste of Orthodoxy happened in Washington, on a Friday night in a friend's home. I watched two candles burn into memories, mesmerized by the dancing flames. My friend had been married to her childhood sweetheart for 20 years. They sang Hebrew and blessed their daughter in the waning day. They asked about my family and whether a life of Jewish rules could be enough for me. At their table, I started to consider living the way they did. Conversation lingered long into the night. The moon shone through the window in their guest room as I tried to sleep in the arc of its light, imagining walking to synagogue on Saturdays, noticing cracks in the pavement, eating kosher food, isolating from the fast-paced world, believing my lifestyle was God's intention, believing there was a God to direct all the people.

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I first met you in New York, when I was a journalist fresh from college and you were the London editor. You breezed into the newsroom, the dashing man with a baritone like the deepest river, that wide smile behind the soft beard, brown eyes sparkling. You were kind and gentle from the first hello. A year later, when I worked in the Washington bureau and you were my boss in New York, I called you for advice or to complain, but really, I just wanted to hear your voice.

By the time we fell in love, I was freelancing in Michigan. I'd bought a house in a sleepy suburb, while your marriage was ending, your khakis roped together with a braided belt, cuffs shredding at the floor.

Our long, late-night calls and tender emails were a refuge from the insecurity of owning a house on a freelancer's income. I was so afraid I wouldn't make it. You drove 10 hours to me, and during the first furtive visits, we were all desire and yearning like a dreamscape in a movie. Your gentle hands quickening the beat of my heart, your honest interest in planting a garden and making a slow meal in my small kitchen.

I hated the games that boys played. You were solid, planted on the earth. Long past shaping your identity, you loved me as a memory of who you once were. You were older, still married, my former boss, so many reasons I wasn't supposed to love you, which is exactly why I did.

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Were we always driving? Heading west, across patchwork highways, northern Indiana under the lip of Lake Michigan, smokestacks blanketing the lakeshore with tiny particles of dust. Through Chicago, to the flatlands of South Dakota, the Corn Palace, Wall Drug, the Badlands. We missed Mount Rushmore when your car broke down, and waited for AAA to arrive. We sat on the side of the road, our feet dusty in the gravel, the still, white sky in a hot day and nothing to say because we'd said it all as the miles peeled away.

Looking back, I like to think the romance of the road entranced me. You were ok not knowing where we'd sleep each night. One late night, we passed the barbed wire of an Indian reservation and ended up at a Christian bed and breakfast. I found it comforting, so many conflicting identities in the same landscape, as if any one could be a wonderful choice.

You loved me with focused attention and quiet study. You introduced me to rutabaga, didn't judge me for eating Burger King, loved my hippie skirts and soft belly. We covered so many miles under the hot sun, soundtracked by conversation and music on the radio. I wanted to tell you everything, and you were content to listen. On those long stretches of endless road, you never felt the need to speak. Sometimes, I wanted your words, your no to my yes, your questions, your nuanced perspective. Your silence was meant to be supportive, even loving, but I wanted to scream just to hear a voice ricochet off the asphalt. I loved the distraction of our spontaneous turn-offs to walk onto a rugged landscape or make love because we could not wait for a destination.

If we had a fork in our road, it was the hike in the Big Horn Mountains. Your little car groaned into the steep incline that took us to the trailhead. I couldn't look over the edge outside the window – the drop was too severe, fear filling my throat. You took it slow, leaning into the mountain, and then we were on its back, in the forest, stepping over ribbons of knotted roots.

On that hike, I talked for an hour about why I loved an Orthodox Shabbat, describing the walk to synagogue beneath oak and maple trees, calling out Good Shabbos to people in dresses and suits, arriving at the home of an acquaintance with a bottle of wine. Hefting up the trail, you reached a hand to guide me over the rough terrain.

I wanted you to say you'd convert, promise to marry me and find a way to make meaning in the mundane. I wanted you to show me which path to take. Anything but silence, and in my head, I raged, wanting to shake you awake. Was it because you knew I had to try everything, to have no regrets? Or did you know that no matter what you said, we were rest stops for each other on a long and winding road?

We climbed to an ice-cold lake and ate cheese and grapes while gazing at the sky. The Orthodox have blessings for every moment: a snack and a sunrise and a rainbow and the first time you see the ocean after a long time away from it. I wanted to consecrate that beautiful hike, but I didn't have the words. We could have prayed together, if I'd known how. You would have done anything I asked.

That night, tired and aching from the thousand feet we climbed, I clung to you at my friend David's house, listening to the river gulping outside the open window, his dogs barking to answer the howl of coyotes in the distance. I want to say we made love with the fierceness of two people destined for an intense farewell, to forever own the searing touch of your skin against mine. But all I can remember is the cool mountain breeze coming in the window and the constant sound of the river and your body beside mine radiating heat.

I had to be in Iowa by late July for a writers conference and so we pushed the little sedan hard to cover the miles in time. I pulled out my bags – warm from the long ride - and kissed you, then watched you fade into the distance, crying at the inevitability of our ending.

After you, I spent a decade with religion, married to a man who wore a yarmulke and with whom I birthed three babies. I thought the structure would suck me into black-and-white belonging, but I was made for bright color. By the time I left that world, you were married again, with a son of your own.

All my life, I've witnessed the streets wear away under traffic and winter salt and blowing sands and harsh storms. We are always rebuilding, widening, finding new ways to structure pavement to withstand greater loads. American highways are a foot thick and covered in asphalt or concrete, with sand and rock mixed in to strengthen the base. Everything needs fortification. Trucks trundle along the web of paths that crisscross our country, shaking its foundations with their heavy cargo. Sometimes, I wonder what used to stand where these roads are now, what had to come down for us to move forward.

07/05/2022 - [Story Unlikely: The Roads we Travel](#)