

Volume Three

Waves, Wind, And Wisdom

Old Roads, New Lessons

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Chapter One: The Leaving

The first frost arrived the night before we left. It coated the yards in Collinsville like powdered glass, thin and sharp in the early light. Each blade of grass held a shimmer, fragile enough to break under the slightest touch. The streetlamp across from our driveway cast a pale orange glow, and in it the world looked both beautiful and unforgiving. You could smell the cold in the air, that metallic tang that tells you autumn is tipping toward winter, whether you're ready or not.

I had been awake since before dawn. Not because of the alarm, but because leaving never lets me sleep well. My mind always churns with lists: Did I turn off the water? Pack the right charger? Empty the fridge? Even after years of making this trip, the same questions chase me around the house in those last hours.

The garage bulb flickered when I pulled the cord, throwing uneven light across the concrete floor. Boxes were

stacked against one wall, neat in their labeling. Kitchen. Bedding. Tools. Plants. Melody's handwriting, slanted but careful, stretched across the tape in black marker. My own additions were quick scrawls—misc., cords, "front seat." Her touch always brings order, mine only motion.

The truck sat in the driveway, bed packed tight and the backseat already claimed by tote bins and jackets. I paused with my hand on the tailgate. The Winnebago was not coming with us—it waited under covered storage in Port Isabel like a patient friend, ready to be woken when we arrived. The truck would carry our season now: clothes, the small tools we'd need on arrival, the plants we couldn't leave behind, the familiar things that make any room ours.

Inside, the house looked different, stripped of the clutter that makes a home feel alive. Counters wiped clean, curtains pulled back, the mail on the table sorted into neat stacks. A pumpkin still sat on the porch, a reminder that we were leaving in fall, not deep winter. Rooms seemed larger, emptier, as if they had already started forgetting us. Houses do that. The moment you remove your life from them, they shift into something less personal, more anonymous. I walked through the hallway slowly, hand brushing the wall, eyes catching on the worn spot in the carpet near the kitchen door. How many times had I walked that same path without noticing it? Leaving makes you see everything sharper.

The furnace kicked on, humming deep and low, nudged by that first crisp edge of the season. I stood still long enough to let the warmth touch my face, then clicked off the light. Each switch I flipped felt like a small goodbye.

Melody appeared in the doorway with a thermos of coffee and one last canvas bag looped around her arm. Her jacket was zipped to her chin, her hair tucked into a knit hat. She smiled, the kind of smile that says she knows I'm carrying more than luggage.

"Ready?" she asked.

The word always lands heavier than she intends. Ready. As if anyone ever really is. I nodded anyway. Not ready, but willing. And willingness, I've come to realize, is its own kind of readiness.

We moved through the motions we've memorized by heart. Bags into the truck. Doors locked. Thermostat lowered. One last look back at the house from the bottom of the steps. The fall frost clung to the windows, glinting against the pale sky.

"Feels colder than yesterday," Melody said, tucking her chin deeper into her scarf.

“That’s why we’re leaving,” I replied, half a smile breaking the tension.

The driveway crunched faintly where leaves had frozen, a thin lace underfoot. I brushed frost from the windshield with my sleeve, watching it scatter into powder that drifted away in the air. My fingers burned in the cold, but I didn’t mind. There’s something honest about frost—it never pretends to be gentle. It announces itself fully, and in that honesty is a strange kind of beauty.

Melody poured coffee into the thermos lid and held it out to me. Steam rose in a ribbon. “To the road,” she said.

I raised the cup like a toast. “To the road.” The bitter heat burned my tongue, but it also settled something in me. This was the taste of departure.

Sliding into the truck, I rested my hands on the wheel and let the heater blast across the windshield. The frost began to melt, thin streams running down like veins across glass. Melody settled beside me, tucking her bag under her feet, her hands wrapped around her own cup. She doesn’t rush these moments. She doesn’t fill the silence. She lets it breathe, lets it work on us.

The first mile is always the hardest. That single turn out of the driveway feels heavier than the next thousand combined.

It's the moment you break the seal, when there's no more adjusting or checking or delaying. There's only going.

The street was quiet as we rolled forward, tires whispering over pavement shaded with fallen maple leaves. Houses stood with lights off, blinds drawn, families still asleep inside. I wondered if they would notice our absence, or if the neighborhood would carry on unchanged until spring. People don't often realize when someone has left until they return.

We passed the diner where the waitress always greets regulars by name. The lights glowed soft through fogged glass. I imagined the clink of coffee cups, the scrape of chairs, the chatter of farmers warming their hands around mugs. We wouldn't be back there for months. The thought pulled at me, a reminder that every leaving is also a missing.

At the edge of town, the stoplight turned green just as we rolled up. A small mercy, but one I didn't miss. I pressed the accelerator, and the road opened ahead, wide and empty.

The silence stretched between us until Melody broke it. "Feels the same every year, doesn't it?"

"How so?" I asked, eyes on the horizon.

"The morning. The leaving. The early cold, the coffee, the silence. It's like the script never changes, only we do."

I glanced at her, surprised by how neatly she'd put it. She was right. Each departure felt familiar in its details—the frost, the bags, the road—but what we carried into it shifted each year. Some seasons we brought grief heavier than the tote bins. Some years we carried only exhaustion. This year, I wasn't sure yet. Maybe a mix of both.

She reached for my hand, her fingers warm even in the chill. "We'll find out," she said softly, answering the question I hadn't spoken.

The road bent southward, frost fading into bare ground. The sky softened from gray to a pale blush of dawn. Streetlights gave way to open sky. Every mile stretched us farther from Collinsville, and yet I could still feel the tug of what we'd left behind. That's the paradox of leaving: distance doesn't erase connection. It only stretches it.

The road began to loosen its shoulders as soon as we cleared the last subdivision. The houses fell away into fields, and the fields widened into that open country where telephone poles take long strides and clouds look like they're going someplace important. The heater settled into a steady breath. The thermos lid sat in the cup holder, thin coffee scum tracing a ring along the rim. I kept my eyes on the ribbon of asphalt unwinding ahead and felt the quiet inside me change temperature, from the cold of parting to the first warm wash of motion.

We didn't talk much at first. There's a reverence to those early miles that makes chatter feel out of place. Melody rolled the window down two inches and let in the tinny rush of air. A song came on the radio—thin and bright, the sort of thing they play on repeat in gas stations—and then the station faded into static and back again, as if the air itself couldn't decide whether to hold onto it.

"We forgot the small cutting board," I said after a while, as if the board mattered more than it did.

"We always forget something," she said. "We'll make do."

"We do always make do."

She smiled without looking over. "It's kind of our specialty."

The grin tugged something free in me. I let the truck ease a little faster as the horizon blushed from pale to gold. On a fence line, a hawk sat hunched like a question mark, watching the field for the answer it expected. A freight train shouldered its way across the prairie, cars clanking in the cool. Billboards appeared and disappeared: fireworks outlet, tractor parts, an injury lawyer pointing at the sky like he knew who to blame. All of it familiar and somehow dear in its ordinariness.

A mile marker slid past. Melody tapped the dashboard once like she always does when she notices a number that means nothing and everything. Little rituals anchor us when the big ones stretch us thin. We had other rituals too. Somewhere south of the river we would switch drivers. At the first sight of a palm tree—wherever that might be this year—we would both say, “There,” at the same time and then laugh like children who’d spotted a rare bird. At the first Whataburger sign, we would exchange a glance that meant, We’re getting close.

The land unrolled in a long exhale. Frost retreated to the margins—crouching in ditch shade and barn shadows—certain of its return but willing to cede the road for now. I loosened my grip on the wheel and let the lane line pull us forward like a thread. At the edge of a town I barely remembered, we passed a church with a message board that read, WE DON’T KNOW WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS, BUT WE KNOW WHO HOLDS THE FUTURE. I resisted the reflex to argue with clichés and, instead, took the comfort on offer. People put up words like that because the road can be scary. So can staying.

Past the river, the sky opened in a way that made both of us lean back and breathe deeper. It’s always like that after the crossing, as if the water takes the weight with it and the far bank gives it back as possibility. We pulled off at a station with six pumps and a bathroom key attached to something heavy

enough to double as a weapon. The air inside smelled like floor cleaner and cinnamon buns. A little boy dragged a stuffed fox by one ear and asked his mother, “Are we there yet?” in a voice that was more hope than complaint.

“Almost,” she said, and he believed her because children always believe the first answer.

I filled the tank and wiped the windshield with the squeegee that left clean arcs in the grit. A trucker nodded at me from the opposite pump, the kind of nod that says: you going, me going, that’s enough to know of each other. When I went inside to pay, the clerk counted change into my palm carefully, as if these were the last coins left in the drawer.

Back in the cab, Melody handed me half a banana and the last of the muffin we’d split before dawn. She’d drawn a small smiley face on the napkin with a pen and left it tucked by the gear shift. It would ride there half the day, gathering coffee stains, until it finally tore itself in two. I would think about it later and marvel at how love slips into the smallest corners and stays there, warm and ordinary, doing its quiet work.

“Tell me a story,” she said, chewing.

“Which one?”

“Your first autumn memory.”

It took a minute to find. “Football on a Saturday with my dad raking leaves into piles,” I said. “I was small enough to believe the piles were mountains. I remember jumping in and coming up wearing the color of trees. The whole yard smelled like earth and someone far away burning oak.”

She laughed, low and soft. “I like that.”

“Your turn.”

“My aunt’s kitchen,” she said. “Pie cooling by the window. Boots by the back door, not snowy yet—just muddy. That feeling of being carried inside by cinnamon and clove.”

We let those memories sit between us for a few miles, two small fires banked against the cool. Then the road invited us forward again.

By late morning the sky had put on a blue that belonged to a different latitude. The light changed its posture—less tilted, more generous. Melody pushed her hat back and cracked the window another inch, letting the cabin find its own mix of inside and out. We passed a convoy of RVs going the same direction, sun flashing on their windows like a secret handshake. Some years we drive alone; some years you can feel the whole snowbird artery pulsing south. Even when we don’t wave, we’re waving.

We swapped seats at a rest stop with a view that was mostly asphalt and a line of trees trying their best to be a forest. I carried the thermos around to the passenger side and watched her settle into the driver's groove, hands at ten and two, eyes already scanning the horizon for trouble and beauty. She drives like she lives—steady, ready for the gusts, confident that most things can be handled with patience.

The afternoon took up residence. That's what it feels like on the road—the day isn't something you pass through so much as something that climbs in with you and stretches its legs. We ate the PB&J sandwiches she'd made the night before, the bread a little squashed but somehow better for having survived the packing. For a few minutes a radio preacher rode along, warning us about the price of pride. Then the station faded and a Spanish-language pop song took its place, all bright vowels and joy. The swap felt like a blessing—less warning, more wind.

“Do you ever think about what we'd be like if we never started doing this?” I asked. “If we stayed put every fall? If we never learned the road's name?”

She glanced at me and then back at the lane. “You'd still wear flannel,” she said, smiling. Then, quieter: “I think we'd be fine. But I don't think we'd be awake like this.”

Awake. That was the word. Port Isabel had taught us how to be awake—in the body, in the spirit, in the small spaces

where most of life actually happens. Leaving wasn't just relocation. It was a recalibration—a deliberate tuning of the dial to pick up a frequency we couldn't catch at home.

We climbed a long, patient hill and rolled down the other side into a riverbed that had forgotten water. The map didn't offer anything but the road's number and the name of a town that had to be mostly gas pumps and good intentions. The sun sat shoulder-high, warm enough now to make us unzip our jackets. I slid the window down and let in a tide of air that smelled faintly of dust and cedar. For ten seconds the whole cab felt like future.

"Remember our first year?" I said. "How we whispered half the drive, like we were sneaking out of our own lives?"

"And how everything felt like a test," she said. "The plan, the tires, us."

I could see it then: our faces in the reflection of a station window, our hands not sure where to rest, our eyes learning the new math of distance and nearness. If there was a grade given for those first miles, I don't know what we earned. But we passed the class that mattered: we kept going.

We stopped again at a station with a picnic table sunburned into the color of old pennies. An older couple sat there with a small dog wrapped in a blanket. She fed the dog

tiny pieces of sandwich while he traced something on a map with his finger, the way men do when they've been trusted with the journey and don't want to waste it. When I walked by, he looked up and asked if the south wind was holding.

"Seems friendly so far," I said.

"Keep it that way," he said, and we laughed in the currency travelers use when they need to affirm a world they can't control.

Back on the highway the light began to angle, throwing long shadows that ran beside us like lean, eager dogs. I felt the day move toward its hinge—the hour when the sun's impatience becomes our own and we want to find a place to stop before the dark erases the lines. We didn't need hookups; we needed a room and a key. A bed already made. A door that would close softly behind us.

We found a hotel on the west side of Little Rock, the kind of place that lives mostly in highway memory: warm lobby, cinnamon-coffee air, a clerk who'd said the same welcome a thousand times but meant it anyway. Melody carried in the overnight bag while I took the tote with chargers and the small lamp we bring to make any room feel like ours.

The door clicked shut. The heater ticked awake. A rectangle of evening light fell across the bedspread. We didn't

say much. We rarely do at day's end. Crackers and cheese. Apple slices. A quiet scroll through tomorrow's route. She set the lamp on the table and the room softened at once, corners turning gentle as if they'd been waiting for permission.

"Thank you for getting us this far," she said—to the room, to the road, to the One who listens. Then she added our simple liturgy: "More tomorrow."

I turned out the lamp and lay there in the near dark listening to the ordinary hotel music—the thrum of another heater through the wall, an elevator bell faint as a memory, a door down the hall closing like a comma. In the quiet, the morning replayed itself—frost, breath, the weight of the first mile—and then surrendered to the afternoon—coffee, stations fading in and out, the child believing in Almost, the couple and their small dog, the man tracing the map. A day is so much when you pay attention to it. It can hold the whole story: the ache of leaving, the soft hand of love, the ache turned into motion, motion into rest.

When I woke once in the middle of the night, the heater was silent and the world was, too. I reached for Melody's hand in the dark and found it. Warm, certain. The only compass I've ever trusted without reading.

Morning would come with new light and the map would widen again. We would zip the overnight bag, return the room

to anonymity, and rejoin the river of southbound faith. The leaving would be behind us then, not forgotten but transformed—put to work as a kind of fuel. That's what the first miles do, the best of them: they teach you that departure is not a wound to carry but a door to walk through. On the other side is another door, and another, and somewhere a causeway leading to water, and a town that knows your name even when you've forgotten your own for a minute.

We didn't need to see it yet. It was enough to know we were moving, that the road had accepted our offering of hours and nerves and small courage, and was giving us back a day we could hold. Enough to know that whatever we had left behind had not been lost, only laid gently down for a while. Enough to know that even now, in a hotel room with autumn's first frost in our rearview, we were already on our way home.