

# Crossroads

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WHEN LITTLE DAVY AND I LEFT HOME, it was to travel a few hundred miles to Downhill Farm in Pennsylvania, get our heads straight for a couple of weeks, and then go home. But in those days, 1973, the road had its own rules. There were turning points, as clear as road maps of the heart and instantaneous decisions that changed the direction, the distance, the destination, and hence all else.

After leaving the Scientology commune, Silent Steam, in New York, where we had stayed for two weeks, we were dropped off in a small town with a wide, wet main street. It was a rainy morning, not ideal for hitchhiking, though somewhat protected by the overarching shade trees. I had my thumb out. A black car pulled over and stopped, and a well-dressed, heavysset woman got out and came walking toward us. My first thought was *Uh oh*.

Her expression was at once wary and saccharine. "Do you need a place to stay?" she asked, approaching slowly, as one might approach a horse that was ready to bolt.

"No, thanks," I said, "We're traveling."

She stopped a few feet away. "We have a place here you can go to, with food and shelter, and we can help you and your child."

All the red flags in my mind were waving. She came closer. I looked around for any escape. "No, thanks, we're doing fine," I said, backing away.

"And where are you going?" It occurred to me that she was planning to call the police or child protection.

"Chicago!" The word tumbled out. Where had it come from? I had been heading directly to Hancock, Maryland, on the Pennsylvania border.

My would-be Samaritan, or social worker, or warden dropped her jaw in horror: "Chicago?!" she echoed, making it sound like the ends of the earth.

My heart began to sing *Yes, we are going to Chicago. Where Debbie had gone. We'd find Debbie, and after that? Well, after that . . . to the ends of the earth.*

*Chicago.* It must have been a magic word. Once uttered, it sent a message out to the universe, and the message was heard. A beat-up, black pickup truck pulled over. I grabbed Davy's hand, shouldered our pack, and we ran for it. I threw our pack in the back, hopped in the cab, and never looked back at the lady beside the road, her mouth still open. I had the sweetest sense of a close call and narrow escape. Only then did I turn to the driver and say, "Hi. Thanks for stopping."

"Looked like it might've been a bad scene back there," was all he said. He was heading west, and that's where we were bound to go.

After adventures at Lake Pomatuning, Cleveland, and Chicago, we found ourselves in Minneapolis. My college friend Sally lived there. We called her from the road, and she said, "Sure, come along," and so we did. Sally and her husband, Chuck, were both associated with the University of Minnesota.

Here was the template of the perfect suburban life. Sally and Chuck, two children, big house, decent values, housekeeper, and au pair. I was so different. I wanted a life close to the soil, whereby I could be self-sufficient, where money wouldn't matter. It's not that we even talked much about it; I was on the road to visit communes, looking for a place to live. While we were at Sally's house, we lived their life, and I pondered what my life was all about.

When we started out, on July fourth, from northern Vermont, I had ten twenty-dollar bills rolled up tightly together in a tiny cylinder hidden in the bottom of my backpack. By the time we got to Minneapolis, four weeks later, we'd spent about \$25. Our main expenses were snacks—crackers, cheese, fruit, and Davy's favorite canned food, which he called "poked oysters." This was before bottled water, so we always carried a jar of juice: cranberry, apple, or V8. Laundromats back then cost twenty-five cents, and the drier was a couple of dimes.

On the last morning in Minneapolis, Sally and her kids drove us to the edge of town. We hugged, and Sally slipped an envelope into my hand. "Bye, Cuz," we said to each other, because it's what we've always called each other. There were tears in her eyes, which brought tears to mine.

After they drove off, I stood at the edge of the road feeling a vast emptiness—what were we doing? Debbie hadn't been in Chicago, not in any of her old haunts. Instead of turning back east, we would keep going west. Why? Now I wondered, on the outskirts of Minneapolis, the highway stretching both east and west, where were we going and why?

I opened the envelope—a note wishing us luck and a twenty-dollar bill. Now I wondered about the tears in Sally’s eyes. Was it because she was sad to see us go or was she appalled at the depths her old friend had fallen to? Davy lifted up his hand, “Look, Eric gave me one of his new cars!” No empty road for Dave that day—he was ready to travel. We put out our thumbs and were off to the west.

On that whole trip, we were given as much money as we spent. It seemed at the time to be a karmic thing.

Weeks later, a waitress named Terry picked us up at the edge of the Andrea Borrego desert in California, just as the border patrol had stopped to question us. She knew the border patrol guy and waved him off. She took us to a Denny’s where a friend of hers worked, and they treated us to a whole meal.

Heading east again one August night through a long line of thunder squalls, we were riding with a very intense hippy couple, their two children, and another hitchhiker. We stopped for gas in western Kansas, and instead of paying, the guy driving took off, speeding east along the straight interstate. We’d gone sixty miles when a Kansas state trooper came whooping up behind. It was pitch dark and 11 PM. Everyone was asleep except the driver.

“Say, you folks forgot to pay for your gas about sixty miles back.” He was smiling and affable. “They’re still waiting for you. Make a U-turn right here, follow me; I’ll escort you back.” The driver set his jaw, crossed the median behind the trooper’s car, and cursed everything out for the whole hour it took to get back to the gas station. They took up a collection, and I put in a couple of bucks. The vibes got so bad, we pulled over for the night in a rest area. In the very early morning, a couple of guys who’d also been sleeping there under the picnic tables invited me and Davy and the other hitchhiker to join them, and we did.

A day later, Davy and I met some people from Versailles, Missouri, who shared their Kentucky Fried Chicken with us—as a vegetarian at the time, I ate only the mashed potatoes. When we got out of their car, the driver slipped me a ten-dollar bill as we shook hands goodbye. Amazingly, later that day, riding in another car, we passed the scofflaw hippies, still heading east, the guy with his jaw set and still cussing, while we’d had meals and money and good times.

That’s what I mean about karmic. It seemed that the guy with the clenched jaw was scaring good things away. He never saw us go by; we were just another car. But I thought about that too, about noticing the world around you, seeing what was right there all along.

Maybe that’s just how the world looks when you’re happy and free, heading where you think you want to be. We’d been on our adventure west. It was early September, and we were going, finally, to

Downhill Farm, and then home to the hills of Vermont. I knew now where home was, as I hadn't known when setting out, thinking about finding a new place to live. Sometimes you have to go away to find out where your true home is. Home looked good from I-70, with the West at our backs. There were a few more adventures ahead before we topped Bly Hill in East Charleston and started down into our valley. But I knew better than to second-guess the future by that time.

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