

# In 1977 my 60-something parents became wanderers.

DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR PARENTS ARE?  
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**B**efore the late evening TV news a public service announcement would ask, "It's 10 o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" and my husband often turned to me and asked in a tone that was half humor and half bewilderment, "It's 10 o'clock. Do you know where your parents are?"

In 1977 my 60-something parents became wanderers, driving a battered car around the United States, leaving a few phone calls and postcards as bread crumbs for my sister Nancy and me.

My Mom and Dad were working-class people who came of age in the aftermath of the Great Depression. Money was tight when they married in 1951. My father aged 32 was a grocery store clerk and my Mom aged 37 was a secretary.

Two baby girls made money even tighter. My father got a job working maintenance in a New York City park but it paid very little and only twice a month, making budgeting very challenging.

My father liked that he was working outdoors even if that work was mostly picking up litter. As blue-collar jobs go, his was fairly unsupervised. He had to punch a clock but so long as the park was relatively tidy no one kept a close watch on him.

Dad was a New Yorker who thrived on the anonymity of a big city. He didn't worry about the socioeconomic status of his job. But Mom had grown up in Hudson Falls, New York, where people knew and talked about one another. "What will the neighbors say?" was a common refrain of hers.

They worried about their young girls' pressing needs for clothes and school supplies. So Dad looked in the *The Chief*, the newspaper advertising civil service employment in New York City, and when there were openings he'd take tests. He obtained a job as a toll collector on the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge. We could afford to leave our Bronx apartment and buy a small house in a suburban-like area of Queens, College Point. The household budget still required careful management but my parents had some breathing space and a place to call their own.

Toll collectors worked around the clock and my father's schedule changed every few days. He put up a calendar in the kitchen listing the days and hours he was working, Monday through Wednesday 7am to 3pm, Thursday through Saturday 11pm to 7am, and the like.

The constant changes wreaked havoc on his sleep. Holidays were always unpredictable. One year we had Christmas dinner at breakfast.

And the work was dull. For eight hours Dad sat in the toll booth taking change from drivers. His only diversion was a transistor radio and sporadic conversations with other workers, his "pals".

Dad never complained. A man provided for his family. He did whatever he had to do.

Mom became a stay-at-home mom who saw her husband as the head of the family. My parents would discuss their decisions, but it seemed my mother saw her role only as suggesting options and if Dad didn't agree with them, acquiescing. If her views were strong enough she would push them, as she did when she pressed Dad to move from the Bronx to a place with a yard.

Maybe the job took a toll on his health. Maybe he just wasn't that healthy. He was overweight though he was not obese. At 42 he was diagnosed with diabetes.

One of Dad's problems was food. My Mom made a cake one day and the next morning half the cake was gone. Dad made excuses to go on errands so he could sneak in a second breakfast at McDonald's. When we took road trips Dad argued that it was cheaper to buy a half-gallon of ice cream at the grocery store than to stop at Carvel.

Dad continually wanted to eat, to fill his stomach with rich meats and carbohydrates that seemed to fill a yearning he couldn't name.

He was sometimes hospitalized to bring his blood sugar down. Eventually he required insulin and had to inject himself with a needle.

## These are the golden years. You know what I mean?

The diabetes affected his feet so that he could barely walk. He was out of work for at least six months. After my father recovered and returned to work my parents decided a few months later to put the house on the market.

It was the 1970s and hard to sell property. The president refused to give New York City federal aid, prompting the Daily News headline: "Ford to New York: Drop Dead".

New York City was not considered a great place to live, and the sleepy area of Queens attracted little interest. But eventually, unexpectedly, a buyer looked at the house and made a good offer.

Mom and Dad rented a one-bedroom apartment in Flushing. They gave the bedroom to their girls and slept in the living room.

Downsizing from a two-bedroom house with a dining room, a living room, a storage room, a garage, and a basement, to a one-bedroom apartment was a challenge. My parents gave up on it.

They arranged for the movers to take some of the furniture, essential boxes of kitchen and bathroom supplies, and bedding.

Then we frantically packed boxes of what was left—a lot. Photo albums, clothes, knick-knacks. Tablecloths, curtains, toiletries. More.

These boxes lined the walls of the new apartment. Some were stacked in the middle of the living room.

My father announced that he had no intention of settling into the new apartment right away. First he and my mother were going to Florida.

"When you're dead, you're dead," Dad tersely responded to Mom's bewildered questioning of why they had to take a one-week trip immediately rather than settle into their new home.

He was adamant. If Mom didn't want to go with him he would go without her.

They went to Lakeland, Florida, a destination he likely chose to placate Mom. Her brother, my Uncle Ray, lived there.

One year after the move my father told me: "I'm retiring next month, as soon as I hit 58. I've got enough time on the job to get a pension. You and Nancy are settled. These are the golden years. You know what I mean?"

I'd never thought about my father enjoying things, aside from our family road trips. He'd always seemed driven to make a living and care for us.

"Yeah, sure. Okay. Wow—so what will you do?"

"Travel the country."

Dad was driving the car I bought when I started graduate school, a 1970 Ford Maverick painted orange. I didn't need or want a car in Manhattan. To say the car was an eyesore is an understatement. In my first week driving it I swerved off the road and hit eight trees. There was not one orange panel on the car that was not dented.

When Dad parked the car in Flushing a passerby asked "How many people died in that wreck?"

Mom and Dad had worked hard to get everything they had but now they discarded most of it. Furniture and dishes went to my sister to furnish her new apartment. My parents kept only treasured mementos such as photographs.

Rather than buy a larger (and more attractive) car or a trailer, Dad optimized space in the Maverick by removing the back seat and putting particle board on the floor.

They drove to Florida, settling briefly in a community for over-55s. Then they went to Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. I am not sure why. I can only guess because this area was somewhat close to the coal-mining country where my father had lived as a young child. After Pennsylvania they went to North Carolina, New Mexico, and Tennessee. Unlike the characters in *Nomadland* they never got far off the grid into the deserts of Arizona or the deep woods of Appalachia.

A year after they started their travels I visited them in an apartment in San Antonio, Texas, near a military base. I had gotten engaged to Paul, an energy economist, and he was attending a conference in Houston. He would join us in San Antonio when the conference was over.

The San Antonio apartment was a two-bedroom with a somewhat faded couch, an easy chair, a card table, and four folding chairs. One bedroom was furnished with an actual bed. My parents told me that Paul would have this bed. The other bedroom had a foam mattress on top of cardboard boxes. Until Paul arrived I would have the real bed and then I would move to the couch.

Mom and I were sitting on the floor in the back of the car when we went to the airport to pick up Paul, leaving the passenger seat for him. "I hope Paul doesn't think we're too coo-coo," Dad said as he pulled up to Arrivals.

"Oh no, no... Why would he think that?" I said.

I visited my parents again when they were living in Kissimmee, Florida, close to Lakeland and Uncle Ray. Here they rented an apartment in a retirement community.

My time there included the requisite visit to Disney World, where my father got tearful on the It's a Small World After All ride and my mother braved a roller-coaster because I wanted to ride it.

We had a turkey roast dinner with cranberry sauce as our Thanksgiving/Christmas meal. I attempted to play shuffleboard, encouraged by some long-time residents: "You'll get the hang of it."

A year or two later Mom and Dad headed to Glens Falls in upstate New York, near where my mother had grown up. They found an apartment that was near the home of Mom's brother Ricky. My parents again furnished the apartment with discards.

My Uncle Ricky, his wife Aunt Lucille, Mom, and Dad became a foursome, meeting at McDonald's or Burger King for breakfast, with the free coffee for seniors. My parents actually settled for about three years.

Then my sister became pregnant and they rented an apartment in Staten Island with the intention of being hands-on grandparents.

Again they moved all that they would keep in the Maverick. They again furnished their apartment with furniture from the Salvation Army and items left on the curb.

My parents reminisced about their time on the road. "I missed you and Nancy. You really miss your children when you travel." After a slight pause Mom turned to Dad. "Right, Mike?"

"Frankly, no," he said, emphatically, turning to me. "Do you go around missing us?"

I was about 35, old enough to realize that parents do not live solely for their children. Neither of mine did. My father was content to know that he had provided for his children into adulthood.

By the time my parents had settled on Staten Island my father had been a diabetic for 23 years. His health problems multiplied. His feet never completely recovered and he shuffled as he walked unsteadily. Diabetic retinopathy impeded his vision and necessitated painful laser treatment. His kidneys were beginning to fail.

Paul and I were immersed in a different kind of peripatetic life. With a doctorate in English literature, I'd scoured the New York City area for a tenure-track appointment. Nothing for three years. People told me to change fields; people told me that Paul made enough as an economist to support me; I should work part-time. But I'd worked for years for a doctorate with my eyes on an academic career. So I accepted a position at Goucher College in a suburb of Baltimore. Paul and I began a commuter marriage that would last 29 years until I retired.

We'd spent a weekend settling into a Baltimore apartment where I would stay during the week when I taught. We returned to New York City and a voice mail on the answering machine: Mom told us that Dad was in hospital. I retrieved the car I had just parked and we rushed to Staten Island University Hospital.

Dad was alert and smiled when I entered, though he couldn't talk because of a tube in his throat. He was in the intensive-care unit for about two weeks and died at the age of 71.

"When you're dead you're dead." My father sensed how short and precious his time was. Maybe he would have liked to travel overseas. Probably my mother would have preferred a bed with a box spring mattress. She lived almost another 20 years, dying of pneumonia six weeks short of her 97th birthday. She took trips to see her brother, Ray, in Florida, and shorter ones to Glens Falls and Philadelphia where siblings lived. But most of the time she stayed on Staten Island, watching her grandchildren, Mark and Mike, while their parents worked.

Although I wouldn't realize this for years, Mom and Dad strengthened my determination to make unconventional choices that were right for me—like being in a commuter marriage.

And they certainly instilled a different criteria for creature comforts. Many older academics who attend conferences reject options to stay in dorms. I, however, think that a place that is fully, if minimally, furnished with actual furniture is a completely acceptable and economical option.

When friends complain about sleeping on their children's futons or getting into cars that are low to the ground, I marvel how my mother—64 when she and my father began their travels—managed.

Now in my 60s, I rewrite my father's words, not "When you're dead you're dead" but "When you're alive you're alive."