

The Men I Left Behind

Mary Emerick

Because of the National Park Service, I left enough men behind to field half a baseball team.

I left them because they were too fat, too skinny, too young, too old. They weren't tough enough, or were so tough there was no breaking through their thick skins. One blazed with a toxic cocktail of jealousy and fear. Another drifted along in his own world, no place for anyone else.

I left some because I was afraid I was in love with them, and others because I knew I never could be.

At least those were the reasons I gave myself. Those excuses sounded good in the middle of the night as I drove through a nameless part of Texas, radio a low lullaby, window cracked to let in the smell of the pavement. But the real reason I left was because I had to go and they wanted to stay. Their pull was not as strong as the current of the road.

Every winter I convinced myself that this time I would stay put. After all, they were actually nice guys down at the core. I could make a life with any of them. I would get a real job, put on a skirt, drive to work clutching a coffee mug and drive home again after a day in an office.

I would stay clean. No more bunkhouses at national park enclaves, no more disappearing into the mountains, no more shoving all my belongings into a pickup, heading out into the

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unknown. I would give this life a chance. I would learn to cook eggplant parmigiana. Instead of talking about what boot oil to use, my conversations would be about Coach purses or what was on TV. Maybe even football; I could take it that far. On weekends, I would go shopping at the mall. I would dye my hair red. Shave my legs more often. Clean up my language. Curling irons, food processors—I would learn the secrets other women seemed to know.

Each season though, the itch would come and not leave. Nothing made it go away. I always wondered what I was missing. What new park waited to be discovered? Should I go west to Great Basin, south to Carlsbad Caverns? The future hummed with delicious possibility.

For a few men, I tried staying on after the season was over. Staying, wintering over, felt lonely. The country pulled back into itself, brooding; the backpackers that swarmed the trails vanished after Labor Day, leaving them quiet and secretive. Snow fell without a sound. It was like a trap door swinging shut. Shops closed for the season; even the grocery store was scaled down to bare bones. I ran into the veterans—the ones with the real, permanent jobs. “What are you still doing here?” they asked. Sometimes it came out as a challenge. Deep down, I thought they wanted us to be gone; they didn’t want to share this place anymore. They wanted us off backpacking through Peru or loading butts on a ski hill, where we belonged. In the spring, after they had time to breathe, we were allowed to show up again, our enthusiasm buoying them for another busy season.

Usually the man I was with could see it coming. It was hard to miss. I weeded through my things, taking bulging garbage bags to Goodwill. I spread atlases out on the kitchen table. I greased my hiking boots. I made phone calls to other women like me. “What’s it like out there?” I asked. “How high are the rivers running this year? How’s the snowpack? How many people are they hiring?”

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Hanging up the phone, I hedged my bets. No, I wasn't leaving. Well, maybe. But just for a little while. I would be back after the change of the seasons. No, it's not you. It's me. The most astute saw it right off. There was no way in hell I was coming back.

The men I left behind were locals, tied by birth or desire to the small towns that fringed the national parks. They sometimes picked up jobs at the park, but they would never leave. This was home for them; these wrinkled valleys and meadows full of amber grasses were places they knew in a way I never could. They meant to raise children here, to die here. They made it clear: I was going to have to choose: the Park Service or them.

After college, unsure of what to do with an optimistic English degree, I had become part of a seasonal tribe, migrating south to north, west to east, every six months. It was the nature of Park Service work: laid off in November, picked up again in May. By now I had lived in parks in Nevada, California, New Mexico, and a handful of other states. I saw others like me at the windblown rest stops: cheap cars stuffed with boxes up to the ceiling, skis and bikes piled on top. We nodded in passing, acknowledging kindred spirits. Most of them were alone too. We were brothers and sisters traveling the major arteries of America. To each of us, the road was as familiar as a neighborhood. It was a river carrying us to freedom, away from anything that might want to tie us down.

And the road was a quirky place, full of the absurd and the beautiful. There was the boy who chased me down in a stubby car just outside of Rapid City, brandishing a homemade sign: WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE MY SHAFT? Another drove naked on I-75. In Texas, a man walked, dragging an enormous cross on his back. A house was burning in Ohio, flames shooting into the sky. I still swear I saw Elvis driving an El Camino on a back road in Oregon.

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I drove through suburbs and inner cities and long two-lane roads dotted with farmhouses. As I passed by, I caught glimpses of someone's life: laundry flapping on the line, a family on the porch. It was strange to think of all the people in the world I would never know.

A butter-colored Chevette was my first road-trip car. It broke down in Roswell, New Mexico; in the middle of nowhere, Nevada; and while crossing a five-mile suspension bridge in Michigan. Each time I patched it together and kept going. The heat quit and the "check engine" light came on and stayed on. I fishtailed in rainstorms and planted it in snow banks. I pushed it to high speeds, discovering that if I hit a cattle guard at eighty, the car would go airborne. I turned up the radio to mask the strange noises coming from under the hood.

I learned how to change the oil, rotate the tires, change out the head gaskets, and put in new brake shoes. Once I labored underneath its low-slung belly for hours, replacing the fuel filter. When I later told one of my friends this, he stared in astonishment: "I thought you weren't supposed to be able to do that yourself!" It never occurred to me to take it in, to have someone else work on it. This car was my ticket out.

"I hope you find what you're looking for," one of the park maintenance guys said as I left yet another place. A thousand miles away, in another town, a man in a bar said almost the same thing. "A lot of people come here looking for something. But if you don't bring it with you, you won't find it here." I just shook my head. Stuck in one place, what did they know?

I tried to learn how to whistle as I drove. I learned that if you chewed too much cinnamon gum, you could burn your tongue. I coached myself through dangerous situations: tornados in Amarillo, merging traffic in Atlanta. I could tell what part of the country I was in by the radio stations. There were the more sedate Ws that heralded my return across the Mississippi, and

the brash Ks of the west. Sometimes the only station I could tune in to carried the anguished voice of a radio host, railing against injustice. I drove in and out of the reach of the stations, music fading and reappearing. I was in a cocoon, rocketing along, untouchable.

These drives had a sense of nameless urgency to them. I sometimes drove deep into the night, featureless buildings passing by in a blur. There was always the hope of making it farther. I redlined the gas gauge, grudging the time it would take to fill up. In the long stretches of Utah and Nevada, I coasted in on fumes more than once.

I saw car crashes, overturned semis, flashing lights signaling tragedy belonging to someone else. But most of the time there was sameness, a security to these road trips. I liked turning another page in the road map, the odometer steadily clicking away the miles.

The men I left behind reacted in different ways. Some cut all ties immediately. Others tried to hang on with desperate phone calls from several states away. "I won't wait forever," they warned. And mostly they didn't, marrying stay-at-home girls. Some did wait though, for years, their letters gradually winding down to the occasional, insincere Christmas card and then tapering off. A few I lost track of, like footprints in snow.

I felt a mixture of relief and pain. Sometimes I wanted them to run after me, throwing a backpack in the car. Another part of me couldn't get out of there fast enough. It was always a test they could never pass. If there were tears, they were long gone by the time I merged onto the interstate. Instead, the destination became my new crush. I dreamed of its contours as I slept beneath clammy nylon in roadside campgrounds, or behind flimsy curtains of truck-stop motels. That familiar brown Park Service sign made my heart beat faster. This would be the one, the place that I would never leave.

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“I have a problem with commitment,” I said for years to justify my never staying put with one person or with one place. I said it, but it wasn’t really true. I had no problem falling in love with the sharp edges of a mountain range, or with a sweet pair of blue eyes. It was only a few months down the road that I realized what choosing to stay would mean. There would be no more long barefoot drives, hair wild and loose, forearm turning brown out the left-hand window. No more sweating water bottle clamped between my thighs, no more gradual change of the country as I drove. No more waking up wondering which state I was in. There would be no more anticipation, no more possibility; nothing that could make my heart beat faster with the scary unknown. The landscape I looked at now would be the same one from now to eternity.

There were some men whose memories stayed with me. Their faces ran through my mind as I lay in my sleeping bag. There was the one who lived in a teepee close to the water’s edge, whose handlebars I rode as we swept through the heart of our small island. There was the one who taught me to fly-fish knee deep in the Yellowstone River. Thinking of them, regret crept in like smoke.

But at the parks, we spoke a common language. We wore the same clothes: pilled old Patagonia fleece, Teva sandals. We all needed haircuts. At the first potlucks of the season, in the bunkhouses, we started the same ritual.

“You worked at Big Cypress? Did you know Mike Patten?”

“The General! Sure did. Just stopped by to see him in Missoula.”

“What year were you at Sequoia? No way, I was there then too; I lived at Grant Grove. Did you ever make it up to Granite Basin?”

“Killer hike! Say, were you on the Yellowstone fires?”

“Wasn’t everyone?”

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You could spend hours at this game. These people were my new adopted family. They understood why I labored to identify a small, feathery fern or slogged up a talus slope just to watch the sun set. They understood the nearly mythical turning of the atlas page, the sweet green sweep of a park seen for the first time from a scenic overlook. The men I left behind could never compete.

I have lived on an island in Alaska for almost seven years now—longer than I have lived anywhere in my adult life. I have let myself sink into the country instead of skirting its boundaries. Staying put, I've noticed what I never did in all the years of moving on. The view might look the same, but there are subtle differences you pick up when you grow familiar with the same mountain's shoulder, the same expanse of sea. There is fresh snow on the peaks that wasn't there yesterday. The tide is lower, exposing the abalones on the rock shelf. You can say that this is the coldest, or the wettest, or the hottest summer you can remember in all the summers you have lived here without sounding foolish.

I miss the seasonal life sometimes. It was simple, uncomplicated, not like staying is. Staying means you face up to yourself in the mirror instead of running away. If you don't like a job or want out of a bad situation, you can't just hop in the car and leave it all behind. You have to let someone you love slip through the cracks in your armor.

My ancient road atlas sits on the desk by my computer. It is the only thing that has stayed with me in all the years of travel. Sometimes I can't resist the urge to riffle through the crumpled maps. Each page is a memory of my younger self, all the highways that have led me to this place.

I've joined the ranks of the veterans, those who stay year round. I gave up the seasonal Park Service life years ago for a

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deskbound Forest Service one. It seemed like the right choice—I didn't want to leave anyone behind anymore. I fell in love. I got married. My friends, still gutting it out in the seasonal trenches, laughed, unbelieving.

"The last of the great ones falls," they said. "When are you coming back down south?"

The seasonals who leave in the fall don't live here through the torrential rainstorms that can last the entire month of November. They don't have to shovel. They don't lose minutes of daylight each day, all the light in the sky slowly being squeezed down to a few precious hours. In turn, though, they don't really know this moody island.

Sometimes I almost dread the seasonals' return. They blow in from all corners of the globe, with tales of skiing in Antarctica, mountain climbing in Nepal. "I used to be like you," I want to say, but I don't know if they would believe it. "I couldn't ever have a desk job," one earnestly tells me.

Hold out, I want to tell them. Fight it for as long as you can. People will tell you that you need a permanent job, a ladder, a lawnmower, a mortgage. "How come you're still single?" they will ask, with equal parts distrust and pity. Don't listen. Pack up your stuff, say goodbye, and drive on, sister. The road is waiting.